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## *Table of Contents*

Preface to the Second Edition .....	3
The Fight for a Leninist Vanguard Party .....	4
Lenin & the Vanguard Party	
Kautskyism & the Origins of Russian Social Democracy .....	11
Bolshevism vs. Menshevism: The 1903 Split .....	17
The 1905 Revolution .....	24
Party, Faction & "Freedom of Criticism" .....	29
In Defense of Democratic Centralism .....	33
The Struggle Against the Boycotters .....	36
The Final Split with the Mensheviks .....	41
Toward the Communist International .....	47

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*Second edition, August 1997*

# Preface to the Second Edition

*Lenin and the Vanguard Party*, first issued as a Spartacist pamphlet in 1978, comprises articles by SL/U.S. Central Committee member Joseph Seymour originally published in 1977 and 1978 as a series in *Workers Vanguard*, newspaper of the Spartacist League/U.S. The articles take up Lenin's fight to forge a revolutionary leadership, an internationalist vanguard party, to lead the proletariat to the conquest of state power through socialist revolution. The pamphlet also includes, under the title "In Defense of Democratic Centralism," excerpts from a speech by SL/U.S. national chairman James Robertson given to a national conference of the West German group, Spartacus (Bolschewiki-Leninisten), in February 1973.

In this second, slightly edited edition of *Lenin and the Vanguard Party* we have added the transcript of a presentation by SL/U.S. Central Committee member Al Nelson to a Spartacus Youth Club gathering in the San Francisco Bay Area which appeared originally in *Workers Vanguard* No. 634, 1 December 1995. Titled "The Fight for a Leninist Vanguard Party," this presentation provides an overall historical and political summation of the crucial importance of the "party question."

A number of the organizations which nominally claimed the heritage of Leninism and whose positions are polemized against in comrade Seymour's series, no longer exist as such. The British International Marxist Group (IMG), an affiliate of the "United Secretariat of the Fourth International" (USec) and in the 1970s one of the largest groups on the British left, has long since ceased to exist. Under the impact of the imperialist anti-Soviet Cold War II of the 1980s, the IMG liquidated into the pro-imperialist Labour Party. The shattered remnants regrouped into a number of much smaller organizations, including Socialist Outlook which claims affiliation to the USec.

The hallmark of the USec has long been its liquidation of the need for a revolutionary party and its corresponding pursuit of social forces other than the proletariat and vehicles other than a Leninist vanguard party to further the cause of human emancipation. Having spent the 1980s tailing after the social democrats and championing the cause of capitalist counterrevolution in the Soviet Union and East Europe, today the USec is in a state of near-terminal disintegration. With the destruction of the bureaucratically deformed workers states in East Europe and the Soviet Union and the triumphalism of the world's bourgeois rulers over the "death of communism," the USec, together with much of the rest of the left, has repudiated even the pretense of Leninism as it seeks "regroupment" with social democrats, ex-Stalinists, Greens, other so-called "progressives" and even openly capitalist forces, within larger reformist organizations.

In the 1970s, Gerry Healy's International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) postured as the defender of Trotskyist orthodoxy against the USec. Healy's organization

imploded in 1985 amidst a welter of exposés of its bought-and-paid-for services on behalf of a number of oil-rich Arab regimes in the Middle East (see *Spartacist* No. 36-37, Winter 1985-86). The criminal political machinations of the Healyites—which grotesquely included cheering the 1979 murder of members of the Iraqi Communist Party by the strongman regime of Saddam Hussein—were matched internally by a brutal bureaucratic regime. The Healyites practiced gangsterism, cop-baiting and a deranged interpretation of "dialectics." The purpose of these techniques was to ensure the membership's cowed acceptance of whatever line the leadership divined in the pursuit of its own opportunist advantage.

It was a biographical rendition of Lenin as a Menshevik, written by British Socialist Workers Party (SWP) head Tony Cliff, which impelled us to write the *Lenin and the Vanguard Party* series. Today, the SWP continues to peddle its reformist wares as a so-called "socialist alternative." The origins of the SWP lie in Cliff's rejection of the Trotskyist program of unconditional military defense of the gains of the October Revolution—which continued to be represented in the proletarian property forms of the Soviet Union, however bureaucratically deformed, and of the deformed workers states of East Europe, China, North Korea, Cuba and Vietnam—at the time of the Korean War. Born of capitulation to the anti-communism of the imperialist rulers, the politics of the SWP and its international satellites continue to be defined by an accommodation to the rule of capital whose "excesses" they seek merely to alleviate. Thus the Cliffites are a modern-day expression of the Kautskyite/Menshevik rejection of the struggle for a Leninist vanguard party.

Today, in the aftermath of the final betrayal of the gains of the 1917 Russian Revolution by the Stalinist misrulers who opened the gates for the destruction of the former Soviet Union by the forces of world imperialism, the idea that the key to the liberation of mankind lies through a proletarian socialist revolution like that successfully pursued by Lenin's Bolshevik Party seems rather esoteric even to subjective leftists. This is due in no small measure to the crimes of the Stalinists, who made a mockery of the ideals of revolutionary Marxism and the instrument for achieving their realization, a Leninist vanguard party.

We of the International Communist League fight for new October Revolutions. In reissuing *Lenin and the Vanguard Party* we intend to arm those who seek to oppose this system, which is based on the exploitation and oppression of the many by the few, with the program desperately needed to eradicate it. Serving as the memory of the working class, imbuing the proletariat and the new generations of youth with the historic lessons of those who fought before them, is a vital purpose of the vanguard party, necessary to lead the working class to new victories.

—5 August 1997



# The Fight for a Leninist Vanguard Party

The following presentation by comrade Al Nelson of the Spartacist League Central Committee was first published in *Workers Vanguard* No. 634, 1 December 1995.

The first sentence of the founding document of the Fourth International, written by Leon Trotsky, who was the co-leader of the Russian Revolution with Lenin, reads, "The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat." Writing on the eve of the slaughter of World War II, the second interimperialist war, which ended with the dropping of two atomic bombs by U.S. imperialism that destroyed two whole Japanese cities, Trotsky said that, "The objective prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only 'ripened'; they have begun to get somewhat rotten. Without a social revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind."

The construction of revolutionary leadership capable of leading the working class internationally—that's what we mean by the "party question." Without a revolutionary party no socialist revolution can succeed, no matter how favorable the circumstances. Until the working class solves the problem of creating the revolutionary party as the conscious expression of the historic process, the issue remains undecided. For Marxists, therefore, it is the most important question of all—the question of the party.

Everywhere you look today you can see the effects of the absence of revolutionary leadership. There's Louis Farrakhan's Million Man March, which is both a perverted response to rising black oppression and also very similar in its reactionary patriarchal ideology to the very large and mainly white male Christian "Promise Keepers," currently holding mass meetings around the country. Or look at the very important Detroit newspaper strike. The workers have shown no lack of combativity and courage yet have been systematically betrayed and demobilized by a treacherous union bureaucracy that fundamentally believes in the interests of U.S. capitalism and knows that strikes are not in the interest of capitalism.

Or look at South Africa. If you read *Workers Vanguard*, it's clear that we aim to construct a section of the International Communist League, a Trotskyist party, in South Africa. Reports of the various comrades who have been traveling through in the last couple of years have had the same theme: the extreme contradiction between revolutionary-minded workers who yearn for fundamental social changes that can only be brought about by social revolution and the leaders of their parties and trade unions who say, "No, no, revolution is not necessary, nor is it possible; we can accomplish our

goals gradually by supporting the African National Congress." Meanwhile the ANC's real goal is to stabilize South Africa politically so that foreign capital can exploit black South African labor even more intensely than has been the case in the past.

Stalinism finally succeeded in destroying the Soviet Union and ushering in capitalist counterrevolution in the land of the first workers revolution, a historic defeat for the world proletariat. No longer having a common enemy, the major imperialist powers are drifting apart like great tectonic plates as they seek to divide up the world into competing trade blocs. We've had two interimperialist world wars that prove that trade wars lead inevitably to shooting wars for the redivision of the world markets.

## Why the Working Class Is Key

Only the industrial proletariat, led by Bolshevik-type vanguard parties, can prevent another world war by destroying the rule of capital once and for all. So what does it actually mean when we say that the revolutionary party is the "conscious expression of the historic process"? The *Manifesto of the Communist Party* was written in 1848 by two young revolutionists named Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. They were, respectively, 29 and 27 years old at the time—just to give a little perspective. With the addition of an updating of the *Manifesto*, written by Trotsky in 1937, many of the *Manifesto*'s most important sections read as though they were written yesterday.

Its fundamental propositions can be summarized in brief as follows: in every historical epoch the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange and the social organization following from it form the basis upon which the political and intellectual history of that epoch is built up. In other words, consciousness is formed in an environment of social institutions created and controlled by the ruling class of that period.

The whole history of mankind, from the period of slavery through feudalism through the emergence of capitalism, has been a history of class struggles—contests between exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed classes. As a propertyed new class arising initially in the Middle Ages, the nascent bourgeoisie was able to develop its own economy, its own culture, religion, schools and so on, i.e., its own social institutions expressing its own social consciousness, *within* feudal society itself. The bourgeois class was able to develop organically within the feudal order. It was driven to overthrow the feudal political system and its social order only when the institutions of



Karl Marx

Mayall/Progress





**Soldiers declare support for Bolsheviks on eve of 1917 October Revolution. Splitting the army was key to working-class seizure of power.**

the old regime—the monarchy, the nobility, the church—prevented the natural expansion of the institutions of capital. The famous “Rights of Man,” one of the main documents coming out of the great French Revolution of 1789, meant at that time the rights of the capitalist class to buy and sell all property, including land, as opposed to the hereditary rights of the old feudal order. It was an assertion of a new property-owning class for which competition was the driving force.

But the proletariat is not a propertied class, and therefore it is not able to construct the institutions of a new society within the framework of capitalism. All it possesses is its labor power which it must sell piecemeal to the owners of industry in order not to starve. With all other productive classes driven out, the proletariat is the special and essential product of capitalism. So society has been split into two great and hostile camps: the working class and the bourgeoisie. They are the main forces in modern society.

Capitalism has concentrated workers in large factories and created great urban concentrations. In so doing it has created the instrument of its own destruction as an exploiting class. The working class cannot therefore emancipate itself from the yoke of capitalist exploitation without at the same time emancipating society at large from all exploitation, all class distinctions. This is what Marx referred to as the materialist conception of history.

### **Socialist Consciousness vs. Trade-Union Consciousness**

To accomplish this act of universal emancipation is the historical mission of the modern proletariat. But the history of all countries has shown that the working class, exclusively by its own effort and day-to-day experiences, is not able spontaneously to develop a consciousness any higher than trade-union consciousness, the need to unite in unions for economic struggle against the employers and the government. But trade-union consciousness is bourgeois conscious-

ness. Unionism in and of itself does not challenge the capitalist mode of production but only seeks to better the immediate conditions and wages of the workers in struggles with individual employers.

Revolutionary class consciousness, represented by the theories of scientific socialism, has to be brought into the working class from the outside through the instrumentality of a revolutionary party which embodies a higher consciousness of these historically necessary tasks than the working class possesses itself. That is the only way the struggles of the workers become *class struggle*, when the most advanced workers become conscious of themselves as a single class whose actions are directed against the *entire* class of capitalists and their government.

The founders of Marxism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and their followers like Plekhanov, Lenin and Trotsky, in fact most of the Bolshevik leadership, all came from the educated classes. As such they were the bearers of scientific socialism into the workers movement because they were educated and were able to study history and study economics and put together the understanding of historical materialism. These revolutionists were the instruments for bringing the theories of scientific socialism into the working class from the outside.

As long as the working class is not mobilized by a party based on revolutionary theory, its consciousness remains determined by bourgeois ideology and culture, leading it to see capitalist society as fixed and not open to fundamental change by workers revolution. This “false consciousness,” as Marx called it, is what we see and confront every day, all over the world. Furthermore, the working class is not some uniform average but is itself very stratified, ranging from very advanced, knowledgeable workers to the most backward layers, blinded by racism, ethnic hatreds and general social pigishness. For the working class to move from an existence as a class in itself—that is to say, simply defined objectively by its relationship to the means of production—to a class *for*



W.W. Norton & Co.

**Russian troops killed during World War I imperialist slaughter. Collapse of social-democratic parties in orgy of national chauvinism led Lenin to call for a new, Communist International.**

itself—one that is fully conscious of its historic task to overthrow the capitalist order—requires revolutionary leadership.

These are the classic Marxist propositions that Lenin argues for in *What Is To Be Done?* (1902) against a current then called Economism. The Economists belittled the role of the conscious factor. Instead they projected class consciousness arising “organically” and “spontaneously” out of the day-to-day economic struggles of the workers. This infatuation with spontaneity was paralleled by a movement to criticize the revolutionary principles of Marxism as dogmatic and obsolete. Essentially, Lenin said, these socialists are adapting bourgeois criticisms of Marxism in order to transform the struggle for social revolution into a struggle for social reforms. In practice this meant tailing and seeking to pressure the bourgeois liberals while limiting the struggle of the workers to union struggles.

Lenin made a particularly powerful argument against the Economists that is fully applicable today, especially in the United States. For socialists to adapt to the existing trade-union consciousness of the workers keeps the workers in a lower state of consciousness insufficient for revolutionary activity and results. Whether intended or not, this adaptation strengthens the authority of the existing union bureaucracy and thereby strengthens the influence of bourgeois ideology upon the working class. In other words, if you don't break out of the framework of simple trade unionism, you simply reinforce the authority of the treacherous misleaders of the trade-union bureaucracy.

This basic lesson is not remote in time, by the way. It is, for example, at the heart of our criticism of the Revolutionary Workers League (RWL) in the current *Workers Vanguard* regarding their role in the recent newspaper strike in Detroit. They formed an ad hoc committee external to the union which based itself purely on a call for more militant strike tactics: mass picketing, defying injunctions, etc. That's all very fine; these are necessary tactics. But the RWL omits completely any *political* characterization of the union bureaucracy and any *political* explanation of why the union misleaders were consciously and deliberately seeking to defuse the militancy of the workers and to wear them down and suffocate them with legal restrictions. Therefore the RWL never raised the workers' consciousness above union

consciousness and actually sowed illusions that a new leadership simply has to be “more militant.”

But in many unions the existing bureaucratic leaderships were the militants of yesterday. Look at the president of the Teamsters union, Ron Carey. He's supported by an outfit called the TDU, Teamsters for a Democratic Union, which is an organization created by the International Socialists a long time ago. Or in the mine workers union, the Trumka leadership was hailed by all manner of fake socialists as representing a new, more militant leadership. And now he's got miners—who used to know how to deal very effectively with strikebreakers—out on the tracks holding hands, singing, “We Shall Overcome.” Disgusting.

And the reason that these militants of yesterday become the careerists of today is because they share and have never broken from the same pro-capitalist outlook of their predecessors. So for the RWL or anyone else to simply keep their criticisms of a given strike on the level of strike tactics and not characterize politically the existing leadership retards and damages the consciousness of the workers. Nothing is learned out of these defeated strikes except demoralization and cynicism.

Socialist consciousness therefore does not simply grow out of the economic struggle. In reality they exist side by side. The role of the revolutionary party is to saturate the working class with the consciousness of its social position and historic tasks in order to mobilize its most advanced layers in a revolutionary assault on the capitalist system itself. Against the attempt to degrade revolutionary Marxism, Lenin called for the building of a new kind of party, a combat party composed entirely of professional revolutionists. Such a party was not counterposed to the unions. The unions, he said, should be the mass organizations—a kind of united front of the mass of the workers—seeking to build as broadly as possible, to unite the greatest number of workers in defensive struggles against the employers.

But to build the kind of highly disciplined, professional organization necessary to lead the proletariat in the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism required that the party recruit only the most advanced workers, who would then be systematically trained in all the necessary intellectual skills to be effective organizers and agitators able to travel broadly and organize other units of the party. In this party, he said, there shall be no distinctions between worker-Bolsheviks



and the revolutionary intellectuals. This requires on the part of the intellectuals that they leave their class and come all the way over to the side of the proletarian party, where their intellectual skills are most valuable.

## The 1903 Split Between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks

This period from 1899 to 1902 was the beginning of Lenin's campaign to build a centralized party based on a comprehensive political program. His desire for a narrower definition of membership was motivated in those early days by a general desire to exclude opportunists and to weed out dilettantes who had been attracted to the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party because of its very loose circle nature.

Later, in 1903 a split took place over Lenin's insistence on an organizational rule that party membership be limited to those who are willing to actually participate in an organization of the party, as opposed to the much looser criteria advanced by the right wing of the party of someone who merely renders personal assistance to the party—basically describing a kind of a sympathizer. Lenin wanted members who were going to devote their lives to the cause of proletarian revolution.

This split was the origin of the Bolshevik (Russian for "majority") faction and the Mensheviks ("minority"). While the split corresponded roughly to a left and right wing, the clarifying issues did not occur until later. It is a commonplace error to state that in 1902-1903 Lenin was fully conscious that his conception of the party was a definite break from social democracy and that Bolshevism began after the split in 1903.

In fact, the forming of the Iskra group in 1900 (around the newspaper of the same name), of which Lenin was the organizer, was the coming together of some of the older Russian Marxists, like George Plekhanov and Vera Zasulich, with younger members like Lenin, as a revolutionary grouping within Social Democracy to defend and restore the basic revolutionary principles of Marxism. The period from the forming of the Iskra group to the final split with Mensheviks and the founding of the Bolshevik Party as such in 1912 marked the transformation of the Bolshevik faction from a revolutionary social-democratic one into an embryonic communist organization.

When reading *What Is To Be Done?*, it's not immediately obvious that until the February Revolution in 1917 Russia was ruled by the Romanov absolutist monarchy, and all Marxists agreed that the immediate tasks were essentially

democratic, the overthrow of tsarism. However, there was an assumption on the part of the Menshevik right wing that this necessarily meant an extended period of capitalism. Basically, this rejected a revolutionary proletarian perspective in favor of a parliamentary opposition in a capitalist government.

Lenin agreed that overthrowing tsarism was the immediate task. But he vehemently disagreed with the perspective that the Marxists should form a bloc with the liberal bourgeoisie. What he posited was an alliance between the revolutionary proletariat and the poor peasantry. As opposed to the Mensheviks, he was trying to draw a class line between the proletariat, and the toiling classes in general, and the capitalist class. However, this theory that Lenin called "the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry" was essentially flawed in the sense that it posited a dictatorship, a state power, of two classes, one of which—the peasantry—is a property-owning class. But it did serve his main purpose of drawing a line against the Mensheviks and their purely democratic perspective. So that was the framework in which these arguments took place.

Lenin's perspective was that the overthrow of tsarism in Russia by the revolutionary proletariat and peasantry would serve as a spark for proletarian revolution in the more advanced countries, where the situation was much more ripe for socialist revolution. He saw the democratic revolution in Russia leading rather immediately to socialist revolution in West Europe, especially in Germany.

In this period up through 1912, Lenin's consistently revolutionary thrust frequently led him to break with opportunism well before he had generalized it theoretically or internationally. Until 1912, the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were sometimes forced to exist as factions in the same party. While building his Bolshevik faction in a very disciplined manner, Lenin had not yet broken in principle with Karl Kautsky's conception of "the party of the whole class." This conception meant that the movement should not be split and that all shades of difference, including opportunism, could exist in one party. Karl Kautsky was the pre-eminent leader of German Social Democracy at the time. The German party was far and away the largest party in Europe. Lenin greatly respected Kautsky, and in fact in *What Is To Be Done?* you'll find Lenin quoting Kautsky on the basic propositions of Marxism.

## War and Revolution

It was not until the outbreak of the first interimperialist war in 1914 and the total political collapse of the Socialist (Second) International that Lenin began to realize in hindsight the implications and effects of his earlier course. With the start of World War I, the parliamentary fraction of the German Social Democratic Party, on August 4, 1914, voted unanimously in favor of war credits for the government, supporting the German bourgeoisie in the war. This act had an absolutely shocking impact upon the revolutionists in the Second International. Lenin at first refused to believe the report.

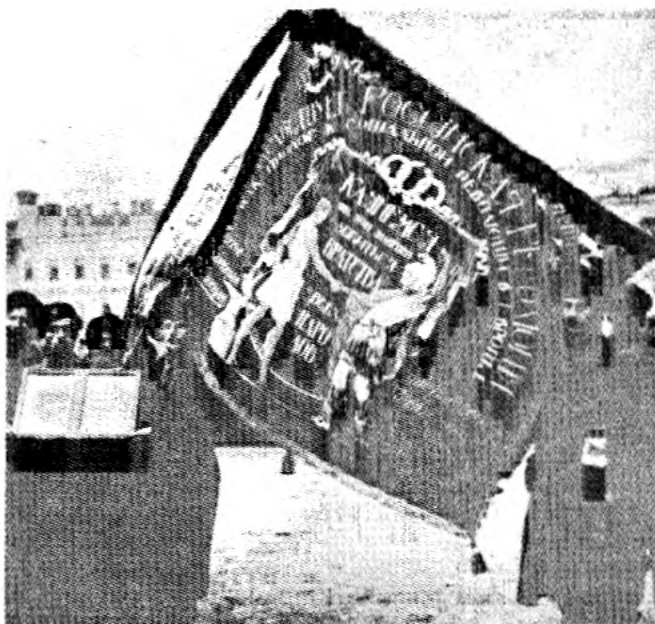
But this single event was to transform Lenin from the left-wing leader of Russian Social Democracy and an embryonic communist into the founding leader of the world communist movement. Following the collapse of the German party, all the other socialist parties in Europe collapsed in the same orgy of social-chauvinism, each one urging the working class in each country to support the war aims of their own



Verlag Kurt Desch

**In 1914, German revolutionary leader Karl Liebknecht courageously voted against war credits in parliament, broke from the treacherous, social-chauvinist SPD.**





**Bolsheviks opposed narrow economism, fought to win Russian workers to revolutionary internationalism. Banner of "Red Putilov" factory workers being presented to army regiment reads: "Long Live All-Russian Revolution as Prologue to Social Revolution in Europe."**

ruling class, totally ignoring their historical opposition to imperialist war. World War I was the most horrible slaughter yet seen on the face of the earth. Millions of the working class of each country were killed. German workers killing French and English workers and Russian workers and vice versa, all being urged on to fight for their respective fatherlands. It was a shocking betrayal of fundamental socialist principles.

Lenin's basic policy toward the war and the international socialist movement was developed within a few weeks. His policy had three elements: 1) Socialists must stand for the defeat, above all, of their own bourgeois state. 2) The war demonstrated that capitalism in the imperialist epoch threatened to destroy civilization itself. Socialists therefore must work to transform the imperialist war into revolutionary civil war, into proletarian revolution. 3) The Second International has been destroyed by social-chauvinism. A new revolutionary international must be built through a complete split with the opportunists in the socialist movement. These principles, these three policies remained central to Lenin's activities right up to the Russian Revolution of October 25, 1917.

Lenin understood that he was advocating splitting the international workers movement into two antagonistic parties: one revolutionary, the other reformist. While in 1903 he had split Russian Social Democracy before it had acquired a mass base, he did not at that time fully realize what he had done. Previously, he saw it as a split of proletarian socialism from petty-bourgeois democracy, i.e., that the influence for opportunism was coming from *outside* the party. Understanding the material basis for opportunism *within* social democracy was one of the main conclusions of his book, *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, written in 1916. It is in this period, from 1914 to 1917, that Leninism arose as a qualitative extension of Marxism.

Examining the total collapse of the German Social Democratic Party, Lenin came to understand that the source of opportunism came from within the German party itself. Its top leadership was based on a labor aristocracy—a privileged layer that was enjoying the benefits of imperialist exploitation of colonies all around the world. The political outlook of the party leadership had become totally bourgeoisified as a result of their social position in German society.

Now Lenin realized that in practice his Bolshevik organization had in fact *not* been built according to the Kautskyan formula. The selecting, testing and training of Bolshevik cadre was fundamentally different than the social-democratic model of Germany. In 1912 they had completely broken politically and organizationally from the Russian opportunists, the Mensheviks—two and a half years before the outbreak of the war. Lenin now took the Bolshevik Party as a model for the new Third International that he was calling for. Following the victory of the Russian Revolution, the Third, Communist International was founded in 1919. All over the world, including in the United States, the Socialist parties split and the left wings founded new Communist parties, organized on the principles, program and practices of the Russian Bolsheviks. That is our model and ultimately where we come from.

## The 1917 Russian Revolution

To see in reality the crucial role of leadership and the role of the revolutionary party, you should examine the course of the Russian Revolution between February and October 1917. Trotsky made the statement that the leadership is to the party what the party is to the class. Many years later Trotsky looked back to 1917 and asked, could the Russian Revolution have happened without Lenin? And he said, I would have to say "no."

There was considerable confusion and disorientation in the Bolshevik Party itself at the outbreak of the February Revolution when the tsar abdicated and a capitalist Provisional Government was formed. Side by side with that government were the *soviets* ("soviet" is the Russian word for workers council). These were mass organizations which sprang up in the 1905 Revolution. Delegates to the soviets were elected from the factories and ranks of the army.

So between February 1917 and the October insurrection, Lenin waged a furious political struggle on several fronts simultaneously. On the one hand, to expose and defeat the authority of the petty-bourgeois parties, the Mensheviks and the peasant-based Social Revolutionaries, who in the beginning had a majority in the soviets. On the other, struggling within his own party against a persistent right wing that was adapting to the opportunist parties who in turn supported the capitalist government. Trotsky said that it was only Lenin's far-sightedness and his considerable authority with the party cadre that enabled the Bolsheviks to seize the moment and lead the insurrection.

In a revolutionary situation, the consciousness of the workers goes through very rapid changes from day to day, and often even the Bolsheviks lagged behind. But finally there comes a time that Trotsky refers to as the revolutionary moment, when the working class has rejected by experience all other possibilities and now has come to be fully conscious that there is no other, lesser course: We must take the power ourselves! Now they looked to the Bolsheviks to lead them.

The other prerequisite for a successful insurrection is the



Spartakist

During East German upheaval of 1989-90, Spartacists fought against Stalinist sell-out of the deformed workers state to capitalism. Banner reads: "For a Leninist-Egalitarian Party!"

temporary exhaustion and confusion of the ruling class itself and a situation where it is denied the instruments of its own state power, essentially the army. You can't have an insurrection while the powers of the capitalist state remain intact. The capitalist state, as explained by Lenin, is the special bodies of armed men whose purpose is to defend the property forms of capitalism. The state, any state, is an instrument of coercion of one class over another. So you cannot have an insurrection without being able to split the army and take away the power of the bourgeoisie to militarily crush the revolution.

By early October 1917, all of these factors came together. The army garrisons in Petrograd refused to take orders from the Provisional Government. They would only take orders from the soviets. Thus the insurrection itself, and the seizure of power, was extraordinarily bloodless.

But as Trotsky says, woe unto any party that flinches at this moment and begins to overestimate the forces of the bourgeoisie or simultaneously underestimates the revolutionary capacity of the working class at the crucial moment. This is what led to the failure of the German Revolution in October 1923, and that failure closed the door for extending the revolution to industrialized Germany and opened the door for German fascism. A frightened ruling class is a very dangerous opponent. Having almost had their power taken away from them, they were going to see that that was not going to happen again. They started financing fascist thugs to break up first the Communist Party and then the labor unions. Then they went after the Jews.

The failure of the German Revolution also ended the revolutionary period that had begun in Russia in October 1917 and left the economically devastated and exhausted young Soviet Republic completely isolated. Lenin and Trotsky knew that for the revolution to survive in backward Russia it must immediately extend to industrialized Western Europe. That was the basic understanding of classical Marxism: You cannot have a revolution remain isolated in one country, especially a backward one; you will be attacked immediately by the other imperialist powers. Therefore, you must take the revolution into the camp of the imperialists.

The closing of that door to Germany demoralized the Rus-

sian workers and sections of the Communist Party itself, resulting in a political counterrevolution led by Stalin and his faction in 1924 against the program and leadership of the October Revolution.

## Democratic Centralism

The organizational practice of a Leninist party is based on the principle of democratic centralism, which means full freedom in internal discussion, complete discipline and unity in action. As Trotsky put it, without inner democracy, no revolutionary education. Without discipline, no revolutionary action. I couldn't do any better than to read a section from our founding documents to describe the basic conceptions of democratic centralism:

"The Spartacist League takes its organizational forms and practices from the evolved institutions and experiences of the Leninist movement, and seeks to function according to the best traditions of Leninism. We seek to make use of the widest amount of internal democracy and discussion which is compatible with functioning in an effective and disciplined way. Unlike many organizations, which give only lip service to the idea of factional democracy, the SL recognizes that the right to factions is basic and that factional struggle is not only educational but is, in cases of sharp difference, the only way in which the party can arrive at the correct political line....

"The SL must be primarily an action organization, not a discussion group. Once a position is arrived at, it may always be overturned by a higher body or later reversal, but until then it must be carried out."

Or, as James Cannon put it, "Only a self-acting and critical minded membership is capable of forging and consolidating the revolutionary party and of solving its problems by collective discussion and decision. A loosely knit, heterogeneous, undisciplined, untrained organization is utterly incapable."

Basically, democratic centralism is a simple principle. If there are disputes or differences in the party, they are discussed and debated up through the national conference, which is the highest body of the organization. But after a decision is reached by majority vote, the minority is bound by that decision in the public actions of the party, including in its press. This does *not* mean that you have to abandon or give up your opinions. That was the bureaucratic and destructive practice instituted by Stalinism. They called



this practice "criticism, self-criticism," culminating in the concept of unanimity. What it really meant was that if you came up on the wrong side of a question, that wrong side being decided by the leadership, you were required to stand up before the membership and criticize yourself for holding the wrong views. In other words, you had to get up and explain what kind of a bad person you were, some sort of petty-bourgeois dilettante or whatever.

But this kind of false confession, this abdication of one's views, simply guts you as a revolutionist. And that mechanism selected people out. What remained were those that learned to live within the framework of a bureaucratic organization where they were expected not to do their own thinking. Whereas we value the critical thinking of our own membership, and encourage it.

In fact that's the fundamental reason for the creation of a separate youth organization, so that it can be a training ground for the party, learning how to build a local, learning how to run local executive committees, how to be sales directors and organizers and writers and put out a paper and run a whole national organization parallel to the adult party itself. And they do so in a way where they're not surrounded by 20-year members of the party, which makes youth feel like they're the dumbest guys in the room, but amongst their peers. This encourages the fullest kind of critical discussion to take place. This is how you build critical thinking and higher consciousness.

### **Bolshevism vs. Bureaucratism**

Social-democratic organizations, because they do not have a perspective of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, but rather seek to pressure its so-called liberal wing, denounce Leninist democratic centralism as being the forerunner of Stalinist bureaucratism. That's the standard anti-Communist syllogism, which you hear all the time now since the bankruptcy of Stalinism caused the collapse of the Soviet Union: Stalinist bureaucratism flowed from Leninist democratic centralism.

Anybody can say almost anything they want in a social-democratic organization, reflecting their completely heterogeneous political composition. Except, there is a party line. It is carried in the newspaper and someone creates it, generally the ruling clique of the moment, which tends to change without any particular democratic discussions. Centrist and social-democratic organizations are always in practice bureaucratic organizations. Centrism is defined as that current which exists between the poles of revolution and reformism. Even in the most left-sounding of the centrist groups there is a conflict between their stated aims—their paper positions—and their real practice.

Another definition of centrism is: revolutionary in words, opportunist in deeds. In fact this contradiction is the source of all bureaucratism. The Stalinists, from 1924 until the 1989-91 collapse of bureaucratic rule, were a living lie. They published the *Collected Works* of Lenin while seeking to conciliate imperialism by preventing workers revolutions. That profound contradiction was the basis for the police state and for the bureaucratism.

The understanding that the consciousness of the revolutionary party is higher than the consciousness of the working class means that we do not go outside the party seeking to mobilize more backward workers to pressure the party internally. Many years ago, we wrote "that the fundamental

principle for communists is that one struggles among one's comrades to gain a majority for one's program, and that anyone who seeks to mobilize backward forces and alien class elements from outside a revolutionary Marxist organization in order to struggle for ascendancy inside that organization is no communist." Building and maintaining the party requires the highest level of conscious effort.

To ensure the revolutionary integrity of the whole party, the leadership must scrupulously guard the rights of all comrades or groupings in the party who have differences with the party. After all, they may be right. We were a left-wing opposition known as the Revolutionary Tendency (RT) in the Socialist Workers Party in the early 1960s. The SWP greatly abused our democratic rights. They kept us from doing public work in arenas of our differences. They kept us off the leading bodies of the party, they denied our right to exist as a faction in the party, and we constantly struggled to simply exist as an organized group trying to bring our views to the party members.

So we learned from this experience, being on the short end of a very bureaucratic stick, and that reflects itself in our organizational rules and guidelines where the rights of factions are codified, the right to proportional representation on leading bodies if the differences are not resolved at a national conference. Once during a debate in the New York local of the Socialist Workers Party, the national secretary, Farrell Dobbs, looked at me, a young supporter of the RT, and said, "The majority is the party!" And that was dead wrong, that was a fundamentally bureaucratic statement. The party is both the majority and the minority.

So we learned from this negative experience. We also understood that these departures from the norms of Leninism were because the SWP had lost its revolutionary perspective and was very rapidly moving toward reformism. They no longer required the practices necessary for a revolutionary party.

I welcome those of you who are joining the youth club this weekend. It is the first important step toward devoting your life to the cause of the proletariat. There is no higher form of service to humanity.

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# Kautskyism & the Origins of Russian Social Democracy



Recently the British International Marxist Group (IMG) and the International Socialists (now Socialist Workers Party—SWP/IS), two of the largest groups of the British “far left,” have taken to revising the history of the Bolsheviks. These groups have attempted to deny or obfuscate the principle of a democratic-centralist vanguard party by pointing to those elements of classic Social Democracy retained by the pre-1914 Bolsheviks as well as to Lenin’s tactical maneuvers against the Mensheviks.

The IMG, British section of the pseudo-Trotskyist United Secretariat, has performed the remarkable feat of making Lenin out to be a unity-above-all conciliator on the grounds that until 1912 the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were formally factions within a unitary Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party (RSDRP). The aim of this particular revisionism is to justify a grand unity maneuver for the British left. Their line is that “the political differences which Lenin and Trotsky considered could be contained within a united organization were vastly greater than those which divide the revolutionary left in Britain today” (*Red Weekly*, 11 November 1976). For an extended treatment of the IMG’s revisionism and its shabby tactical purpose, see “IMG Turns Lenin into a Menshevik,” *Workers Vanguard* No. 164, 1 July 1977.

The most ambitious rewriting of Bolshevik history is that of Tony Cliff, longtime leader of the workerist-reformist SWP/IS. The Cliff tendency today sports a “left” veneer; sometimes they even parade around with portraits of Lenin and Trotsky. But this group had its 4th of August long ago, when in 1950, under the pressure of intensely anti-Communist public opinion, it refused to defend North Korea against U.S. imperialism and broke with the Trotskyist movement over this question. And yet this utterly shameless CIA “socialist” now presumes to lecture on what Lenin really meant to say in *What Is To Be Done?*

In the past, Cliff has been a prominent, explicitly anti-Leninist purveyor of Menshevism. His 1959 pamphlet, *Rosa Luxemburg*, states: “For Marxists in the advanced industrial countries, Lenin’s original position can much less serve as a guide than Rosa Luxemburg’s.” This bald statement was deleted from the second (1968) edition, but Cliff’s substantive position remained the same.

However the Cliffites are nothing if not trendy. And in contrast to the 1950s and ‘60s, “hard” Bolshevism is now “in” among young leftists. So recently Cliff has written a seemingly sympathetic biography of Lenin, of which two of three projected volumes have appeared. Here Cliff presents Lenin in his own image as a nationally limited, workerist

eclectic. Cliff’s central message is that there are no Leninist principles or even norms on the organization question:

“Lenin’s attitude to organisational forms was always historically concrete, hence its strength. He was never taken in by abstract, dogmatic schemes of organisation, but always ready to change the organisational structure of the party to reflect the development of the class struggle.

“Organisation is subordinate to politics. This does not mean that it has no independent *influence* on politics. But it is, and must be, subordinated to the concrete policies of the day. The truth is always concrete, as Lenin reiterated again and again. And this also applies to the organisational forms needed to undertake the concrete tasks.” [emphasis in original]

In other words, whatever works at the time, do it.

Genuine Leninists recognize the primacy of the principles embodied in the first four congresses of the Communist International over pre-1914 Bolshevik practice. Furthermore, Trotsky in building the Fourth International systematized and deepened Leninist concepts developed in rudimentary form during the revolutionary turmoil of 1917-23. To deny the *evolution* of Bolshevism from 1903 to 1917 is to obliterate the principled opposition of Leninism to Kautskyism. To appeal to pre-1914 Bolshevik practice against the democratic centralism of Trotsky’s Fourth International is equivalent to citing Lenin’s “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry” against Trotsky’s “permanent revolution.”

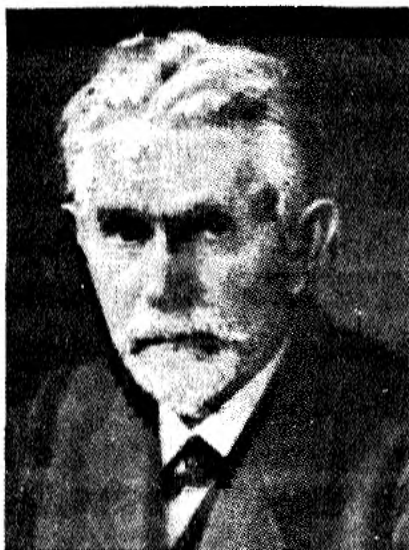
## The Kautskyan Party of the Whole Class

The first volume of Cliff’s biography, subtitled “Building the Party,” ends in 1914. This work mentions Kautsky exactly twice and the Second International not at all! Such an incredible omission warrants dismissing Cliff’s book out of hand as a serious study of Lenin’s position on the party question.

From August Bebel’s offer in 1905 to mediate the Bolshevik-Menshevik split to the “unity conference” arranged by the International Socialist Bureau on the eve of World War I, the International leadership played a significant role in the internal life of the RSDRP. The pro-unity elements in particular, above all Luxemburg and Trotsky, sought to achieve through the German-centered International what they could not attain within the Russian movement.

Lenin was a revolutionary social democrat and, as Cliff himself notes in his second volume, Kautsky “had been the only living socialist leader whom Lenin revered.” (This is actually an overstatement: in 1905 when Kautsky supported the Mensheviks, Lenin was harshly critical of him.) An understanding of Lenin’s position on the party question must therefore begin with the orthodox Kautskyan position; this was the doctrine of the “party of the whole class,” or “one class—one party.” Kautsky’s “party of the whole class” did *not* mean the recruitment of the entire proletarian population to the party. He recognized that the political activists within the working class would be an elite minority. No social democrat denied that membership standards involved some level of socialist consciousness, activism and discipline. What the Kautskyan doctrine did mean was that all tendencies regarding themselves as socialist should be in a unitary party. Kautsky maintained that revolutionary social democrats could unite and even have comradely collaboration with non-Marxist reformists. Thus the leadership of the German Social Democracy (SPD) at various times collaborated closely with the avowedly reformist, eclectic French socialist, Jean Jaurès.

The SPD leadership was immensely proud of their party’s disciplined unity, which they regarded as the main source of



August Bebel

Der Spiegel



Karl Kautsky

Verlag Kurt Desch

its strength. Bebel/Kautsky played a decisive role in the 1905 reunification of the French socialists, overcoming the split between the Marxist Parti Socialiste de France led by Jules Guesde and the reformist Parti Socialiste Français of Jaurès.

During the campaign to reunite the French, the International adopted the doctrine of "one class—one party" in resolution form at its 1904 Amsterdam Congress:

"In order that the working class may put forth all its strength in the struggle against capitalism it is necessary that in every country there exist vis à vis the bourgeois parties, only *one* socialist party, as there exists only *one* proletariat. Therefore, it is the imperative duty of all comrades and socialist organizations to make every effort to bring about this unity on the basis of the principles established by the international congresses, a unity necessary in the interests of the proletariat before which they are responsible for all fatal consequences of a continued breach." [emphasis in original]

—reproduced in Olga Hess Gankin and H.H. Fisher, eds., *The Bolsheviks and the World War* (1940)

Before World War I, Lenin never challenged the above principle and on occasion affirmed it. When in 1909 the Bolsheviks expelled the ultra-left Otzovists (the "Ultimatists") from their ranks, Lenin justified this by contrasting the *exclusiveness* of a faction to the *inclusiveness* of a social-democratic party:

"In our Party Bolshevism is represented by the Bolshevik *section*. But a section is not a party. A party can contain a whole gamut of opinions and shades of opinion, the extremes of which may be sharply contradictory. In the German party, side by side with the pronouncedly revolutionary wing of Kautsky, we see the ultra-revisionist wing of Bernstein." [emphasis in original]

—"Report on the Conference of the Extended Editorial Board of *Proletary*" (July 1909)

In practice in Russia, Lenin strove to create a disciplined, programmatically homogeneous revolutionary vanguard. Until World War I, however, he did not break in principle with the Kautskyan doctrine of "the party of the whole class." The resolution of that dialectical contradiction was one of the important elements creating Leninism as a world-historic doctrine, as the Marxism of our epoch.

### Kautsky's Analysis of Opportunism

The Kautskyan doctrine of the inclusive party was predicated on a particular historico-sociological theory opportu-

nism. Opportunist tendencies, it was argued, were a survival of petty-bourgeois democracy carried mainly by the intelligentsia and conditioned by the economic and ideological backwardness or immaturity of the working masses. The growth of the proletariat and of its organization would eventually strengthen revolutionary social democracy. Thus, Kautsky could tolerate a current like Jaurèsism as a kind of inevitable transition from radical democracy to revolutionary Marxism.

Kautsky's identification of opportunism with *pre-Marxist* tendencies derived from the history of the European left in the decades following the revolutions of 1848. The principal tendencies opposed to Marxism (e.g., Proudhonism, Lassalleism, Bakuninism) all expressed the desire of the artisan class to prevent its descent into the industrial proletariat. Marx and Engels understood that artisan utopian socialism could not be defeated

simply through propaganda and agitation but required the actual development of capitalist society. It was recognized in the Second International that Marxism superseded such primitivist tendencies as Lassalleism in Germany and Proudhonism in France primarily through the transformation of the urban artisan classes into a modern proletariat. The process by which Marxism overcame Lassalleism, Proudhonism, Bakuninism, etc. became for Kautsky a paradigm of the struggle against opportunism in general.

The view of reformism as a historic lag or regression accounts for Kautsky's *limited* aims in the "revisionist" controversy with Bernstein. He drew a sharp line between naive, pre-Marxian reformists, like Jaurès, and the conscious revisers of Marxism. In a letter of 23 May 1902 to Victor Adler, Kautsky defended the Belgian Socialist leadership from the charge of revisionism on the grounds that they were never Marxists to begin with, nor did they pretend to be:

"I maintain an entirely unprejudiced attitude towards them; the talk about their revisionism leaves me cold. They have nothing to revise, for they have no theory. The eclectic vulgar socialism to which the revisionists would like to reduce Marxism is something beyond which they [the Belgian Socialists] have not even begun to advance. Proudhon, Schaffle, Marx—it is all one to them, it was always like that, they have not retrogressed in theory, and I have nothing to reproach them with."

—quoted in George Lichtheim, *Marxism* (1961)

Kautsky's aim in the "revisionist" controversy was not to purge the Second International of reformist tendencies or even practices, but to preserve the doctrinal integrity of the Marxist camp. If this were achieved, believed Kautsky, the development of the class struggle would eventually ensure the triumph of revolutionary social democracy.

Kautsky located the weakness of revolutionary social democracy in the backwardness of the proletariat, which reflected either a continued identification with the petty bourgeoisie or a lack of confidence in the strength of the workers movement:

"To a large degree hatched out of the small capitalist and small farmer class, many proletarians long carry the shells of these classes about with them. They do not feel themselves proletarians, but as would-be property owners.... Others, again, have gone further, and have come to recognize the necessity of fighting the capitalists that stand in antagonism to them, but do not feel themselves secure enough and strong enough to



Delegates to the 1904  
Amsterdam Congress  
of the Second  
International.



declare war on the entire capitalist system. These look to capitalist parties and governments for relief."

—*The Road to Power* (1909)

For Kautsky, the growth of the proletariat, of the trade unions, etc. strengthened the objectively revolutionary forces in society. What was required of Social Democracy was a patient, pedagogical attitude toward backward workers, although Kautsky also recognized that class consciousness could leap ahead during a revolutionary crisis.

With the partial exception of Luxemburg, no pre-war social democrat located the main source of reformism in the conservatism of the socially privileged bureaucracy created by the growth and strength of the labor movement, of the social-democratic parties and their trade-union affiliates.

### Lenin's Sociological Analysis of Menshevism

Lenin, following Kautsky's methodology, regarded Menshevism as an extension of 19th-century petty-bourgeois radicalism into the workers movement. Because he considered the Mensheviks an "intellectualist" tendency, in a sense standing outside of the workers movement, he could split from them without positing the existence of two competing social-democratic parties, the one revolutionary, the other reformist. Lenin was convinced that the growth of social-democratic organization among the Russian proletariat would ensure the triumph of Bolshevism.

Lenin regarded the 1903 Martovite grouping as an expression of the attitudes and values of the old, freewheeling, individualistic revolutionary intelligentsia, as a rebellion of the circle spirit against the construction of a real workers party:

"Nonetheless, we regard the Party's sickness as a matter of growing pains. We consider that the underlying cause of the crisis is the transition from the circle form to party forms of the life of Social-Democracy; the essence of its internal struggle is a conflict between the circle spirit and the party spirit. And, consequently, only by shaking off this sickness can our Party become a *real* party....

"Lastly, the opposition cadres have in general been drawn chiefly from those elements of our Party which consist primarily of intellectuals. The intelligentsia is always more individualistic than the proletariat, owing to its very conditions of life and work, which do not directly involve a large-scale combination of efforts, do not directly educate it through organized collective labor. The intellectual elements therefore find it harder to adapt themselves to the discipline of Party life, and those of them who are not equal to it naturally raise the standard of revolt against the necessary organisational limitations." [emphasis in original]

—"To the Party" (August 1904)

Lenin likewise analyzed Menshevik Liquidationism during the 1908-12 period (opposition to the underground party) in terms of intellectuals versus the proletariat:

"The first to flee from the underground were the bourgeois intellectuals who succumbed to the counter-revolutionary mood, those 'fellow-travellers' of the Social-Democratic working-class movement who, like those in Europe, had been attracted by the liberating role played by the proletariat...in the bourgeois revolution. It is a well-known fact that a mass of Marxists left the underground after 1905 and found places for themselves in all sorts of legal cozy corners for intellectuals."

—"How Vera Zasulich Demolishes Liquidationism" (September 1913)

Lenin's sociological analysis of Menshevism was valid as far as it went. The Martovite grouping in 1903 did represent in part the habits of the old revolutionary intelligentsia; one thinks of Vera Zasulich in this regard. Menshevik Liquidationism did represent in part the fleeing of intellectuals from the RSDRP toward bourgeois respectability during a period of reaction. But Menshevism was not primarily a tendency *external* to the labor movement. The Russian Mensheviks anticipated the labor reformism of the Second International as a whole, including particularly its mass parties. It was only during World War I, in the studies which led to *Imperialism*, that Lenin located the source of social-democratic opportunism *within* the workers movement—in a labor bureaucracy resting on the upper stratum of the working class.

### Iskraism

Organized Russian Marxism originated in 1883 when Plekhanov broke from the dominant populist current to form the tiny exile Emancipation of Labor group. During the late 1880s-early '90s, Marxism in Russia consisted of localized propaganda circles designed to educate a thin layer of advanced workers. In the mid-1890s, the Marxist propaganda circles turned toward mass agitation intersecting a major strike wave. This turn was in part inspired by the Jewish Bund. Ethnic solidarity enabled the Jewish Marxist intelligentsia to reach and organize Jewish workers in advance of Russian Social Democracy as a whole.

In part because of the imprisonment of the more experienced Marxist leaders (e.g., Lenin, Martov), the turn toward mass agitation rapidly degenerated into reformism. This tendency, dubbed Economism by a hostile Plekhanov, limited its agitation to elementary trade-union demands, while passively supporting the bourgeois liberal efforts to reform tsarist absolutism. In terms of international Social Democracy, the Economists were hostile to orthodox Marxism and



consequently were loosely associated with Bernsteinism in Germany and *possibilisme* in France. In the later 1890s, Economism was the dominant tendency among Russian social democrats.

In 1900, the second generation of Russian Marxists (Lenin, Martov) coalesced with the founding fathers (Plekhanov, Axelrod, Zasulich) to return Russian Social Democracy to its revolutionary traditions as embodied in the original Emancipation of Labor program. The revolutionary Marxist tendency was organized around the paper *Iskra*. Lenin was the organizer of the *Iskra* group. He ran the agents in Russia whose task was to win over the local social-democratic committees or if necessary split them. *Iskra* provided, for the first time, an organizing center for a Russian social-democratic party.

In polemicalizing against Lenin's successful splitting tactics, the Economists pointed out that the German center did not seek to exclude the Bernsteinians. Lenin did not and in a sense could not argue for the exclusion of opportunists from the social-democratic party as a principle. Rather he justified his splitting tactics by a series of arguments based on the particularities of the Russian party situation. Right up to World War I, Lenin would appeal to one or another aspect of Russian particularism to justify constructing a programmatically homogeneous, revolutionary vanguard.

What were Lenin's arguments for building the RSDRP without and against the Economists? The German party had strong revolutionary traditions and an authoritative leadership. The Russian party was embryonic and could easily fall prey to opportunism. The German leadership, Bebel/Kautsky, were revolutionary while the Bernsteinians were a small minority; in contrast, the Economists were temporarily the dominant trend in Russian Social Democracy. The German "revisionists" accepted party discipline, the Russian Economists were incapable of accepting party discipline. And in any case, the RSDRP did not exist as a centralized organization. These arguments are presented in *What Is To Be Done?* (1902):

"The important thing to note is that the opportunist attitude towards revolutionary Social-Democrats in Russia is the very opposite of that in Germany. In Germany...revolutionary Social-Democrats are in favor of preserving what is: they stand



Pavel Axelrod

Progress Publishers



Georgi Plekhanov

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in favor of the old program and tactics which are universally known.... The 'critics' desire to introduce changes, and as these critics represent an insignificant minority, and as they are very shy and halting in their revisionist efforts, one can understand the motives of the majority in confining themselves to the dry rejection of 'innovation.' In Russia, however, it is the critics and Economists who are in favor of what is; the 'critics' wish us to continue to regard them as Marxists, and to guarantee them the 'freedom of criticism' which they enjoyed to the full (for, as a matter of fact, they never recognized any kind of Party ties, and, moreover, we never had a generally recognized Party organ which could 'restrict' freedom of criticism even by giving advice)." [emphasis in original]

As is generally recognized, Lenin's 1902 *What Is To Be Done?* was the authoritative statement of Iskraisism. Despite his supposed sympathy toward Lenin, Cliff is much too much a workerist and Menshevik to accept *What Is To Be Done?* In fact, a central purpose of his biography is to argue that the 1902 polemic is an exaggerated, one-sided statement which in substance Lenin subsequently repudiated.

First Cliff vulgarizes Lenin's position and then polemicalizes against his own straw-man creation:

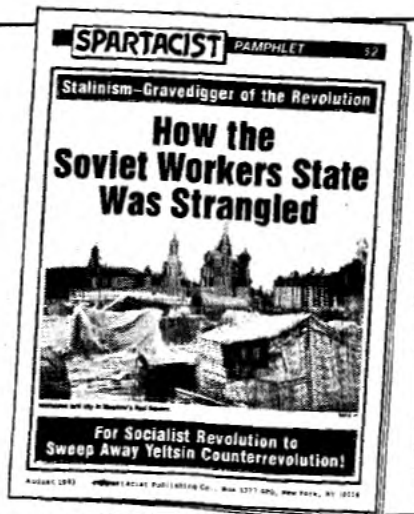
"In general the dichotomy between economic and political struggle is foreign to Marx. An economic demand, if it is sectional, is defined as 'economic' in Marx's terms. But if the same demand is made of the state it is 'political'.... In many

This pamphlet brings together articles from *Workers Vanguard*, newspaper of the Spartacist League/U.S., and the Russian-language *Spartacist Bulletin* covering the recent events in the ex-USSR. Beginning with the pathetic "Emergency Committee" putsch and Yeltsin's pro-imperialist counter coup in August 1991, the material contained in the pamphlet documents the unfolding counterrevolution and the Trotskyist program to resist and reverse it. Included are several polemical articles which expose the role of numerous Western "leftists" in backing Yeltsinite counterrevolution and that of the Stalinist remnants in the former Soviet Union, whose bankruptcy is epitomized by their despicable "red-brown coalition" with virulent Russian nationalists, monarchists and outright fascists.

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cases economic (sectional) struggles do not give rise to political (class-wide) struggles, but there is no Chinese wall between the two, and many economic struggles *do* spill over into political ones." [emphasis in original]

Lenin did not attack the Economists for being indifferent to governmental policy. The Russian Economists agitated for state-initiated economic reforms and supported democratic rights, particularly the right to organize. In this purpose they passively supported the liberals. In *What Is To Be Done?* Lenin attacks the Economists' political program as encapsulated in the slogan "giving the economic struggle itself a political character":

"Giving 'the economic struggle itself a political character' means, therefore, striving to secure satisfaction for these trade demands, the improvement of conditions of labor in each separate trade by means of 'legislative and administrative measures'.... This is exactly what the trade unions do and have always done...."

"Thus, the pompous phrase 'giving the economic struggle *itself* a political character' which sounds so 'terrifically' profound and revolutionary, serves as a screen to conceal what is in fact the traditional striving to *degrade* Social-Democratic politics to the level of trade union politics!" [emphasis in original]

For Lenin political class consciousness, or socialist consciousness, was the recognition by the proletariat of the need to become the ruling class and reconstruct society on socialist foundations. Anything less was trade-union consciousness.

Like all other current workerists and social democrats, Cliff must attack Lenin's famous statement that socialist consciousness is brought to the workers from without by revolutionary intellectuals, that political class consciousness does not arise simply through the proletariat's struggles to improve its conditions. Here are Cliff's fatuous remarks on this question:

"There is no doubt that this formulation overemphasized the difference between spontaneity and consciousness. For in fact

the complete separation of spontaneity from consciousness is mechanical and non-dialectical. Lenin, as we shall see later, admitted this. Pure spontaneity does not exist in life....

"The logic of the mechanical juxtaposition of spontaneity and consciousness was the complete separation of the party from the *actual* elements of working-class leadership that had already risen in the struggle. It assumed that the party had answers to all the questions that spontaneous struggle might bring forth. The blindness of the embattled many is the obverse of the omniscience of the few." [emphasis in original]

It is important to quote Lenin's statement in full to understand what it means and does not mean:

"We said that *there could not yet be* Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. This consciousness could only be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., it may itself realize the necessity of combining in unions, for fighting against the employers and for striving to compel the government to pass necessary labor legislation, etc. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories that were elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intellectuals. According to their social status, the founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia. Similarly in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of Social-Democracy arose quite independently of the spontaneous growth of the labor movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of ideas among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia." [emphasis in original]

—*What Is To Be Done?*

This is not a programmatic statement, but rather a *historical* analysis with implications for the organizational question. The socialist movement *predated* the development of mass economic organizations of the industrial proletariat. The socialist movement arose out of the bourgeois-democratic revolutionary currents (the Babouvist tradition represented by Blanquism in France and the League of the Just in Germany). Except for Britain, the earliest trade unions arose through the



St. Petersburg, 1887:  
Lenin (seated at  
center) and Martov  
(seated at right) with  
the other leaders of  
the League of Struggle  
for the Emancipation  
of the Working Class.



transformation of the old mercantilist artisan guild system.

For example, in the German revolution of 1848 Stephan Born's mass trade-union movement, the Workers Brotherhood, was largely based on the traditional guild structure. The leaders of the embryonic trade unions were generally the traditional authority figures of the plebeian community. Methodist ministers, like the Tory radical J.R. Stephens, played a significant leadership role in the early 19th-century British workers movement. Catholic priests played a similar role in the first French trade unions, for example among the rebellious silk workers of Lyons. In most countries the emergence of a socialist labor movement resulted from the political victory of the revolutionary intelligentsia over the traditionalist leaders of the early workers organizations. When Lenin wrote *What Is To Be Done?* the mass economic organizations of the Russian working class were the police-led unions (Zubatovite) whose most prominent leader was the priest Gapon.

Lenin was a dialectician who understood that the consciousness and leadership of the working class underwent qualitative changes historically. With the important exception of the U.S., trade-union economism (associated with bourgeois liberal illusions and religious obscurantism) is *no longer* the dominant ideology of the world's proletariat. In the advanced capitalist countries, it is socialist reformism, carried through the social-democratic and Stalinist labor bureaucracies, which binds the working class to the bourgeois order. In backward countries, populist nationalism with a socialist coloration (e.g., Peronism, Nasserism) is the characteristic form of bourgeois ideological dominance over the working masses.

In the Russia of 1902, a small, homogeneous Marxist vanguard, composed of declassed intellectuals with a thin layer of advanced workers, was able to break the mass of the workers from police trade unionism and the Orthodox church. Today it requires an international Trotskyist vanguard, necessarily composed in its first stages of declassed intellectuals with relatively few advanced workers, to break

the world's working classes from the domination of social-democratic and Stalinist reformism and populist nationalism.

In exactly the opposite sense of Cliff, *What Is To Be Done?* cannot be regarded as the definitive Leninist statement on the party question. Despite the angularity of its formulations, the 1902 polemical work does not go beyond the bounds of orthodox, pre-1914 Social Democracy. If this work had represented a radical break with Social Democracy, Plekhanov, Martov et al. would never have endorsed it. It was only *after* the split in 1903 that Martov, Axelrod and other Menshevik leaders discovered in *What Is To Be Done?* alleged substitutionist and Blanquist conceptions. It was Lenin's intransigent attitude in practice toward opportunism, circle-spirit cliquism and all obstacles to building a revolutionary RSDRP that caused the Menshevik split, not particularly the ideas expressed in *What Is To Be Done?* If Cliff finds *What Is To Be Done?* too Leninist for his liking, it is because his hostility to Bolshevism is so strong that he must reject Lenin even when the latter was still a revolutionary *social democrat*. In reality the 1902 work is an *anticipation*, not a full-blown exposition, of post-1917 communism.

It is common in left-wing circles to regard *What Is To Be Done?* as the definitive Leninist statement on the party question. For example, the American Shachtmanite Bruce Landau, in a critical review of Cliff's biography (*Revolutionary Marxist Papers* No. 8), concentrates on the *Iskra* period. He justifies this narrow focus by quoting Trotsky on Lenin's development:

"It was precisely during this short time that Lenin became the Lenin he was to remain. This does not mean that he did not develop further. On the contrary. He grew in stature...until October and after; but this was really organic growth."

—On Lenin: *Notes for a Biography* (1924)

Trotsky is here referring to the development of Lenin's political *personality*, not to his ideas and their programmatic expression. The decisive period for the development of Leninist communist doctrine was 1914-17, not 1900-03.

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# Bolshevism vs. Menshevism: The 1903 Split



The Second Congress of the RSDRP, held in Brussels and then London in July-August 1903, was to be the culmination of the Iskraist project to create a centralized party based on a comprehensive program. (In part because of repression, the formal founding congress of the RSDRP in 1898 did not change the nature of Russian Social Democracy from a movement of localized propaganda circles.) The Economists were not excluded from the Congress, but it was arranged so that the Iskraists would be a decisive majority. The *Iskra* group accounted for about two-thirds of the Second Congress' 46 delegates. Of the remaining third, about half were anti-Iskraists. These consisted of a few prominent Economists (Martynov, Akimov) and the semi-nationalist Bund, which claimed to be the sole representative of the Jewish proletariat and demanded a federated party.

In the first phase of the Congress, a solid Iskraist majority carried its line. The Iskraist group, including future Mensheviks, voted unanimously for a program which included elements later very much characteristic of Leninism. For example, the section "On the Trade Union Struggle" contains the following passage:

"In so far as this struggle develops in isolation from the political struggle of the proletariat led by the Social Democratic Party, it leads to the fragmentation of the proletarian forces and to subordination of the workers' movement to the interests of the propertied classes."

—Robert H. McNeal, ed., *Resolutions and Documents of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (1974)

However, beneath the seemingly solid front of the *Iskra* group were very considerable tensions. One such potential polarity was between Lenin and Martov, who was consistently more conciliatory to the non- and anti-Iskraist elements of Russian Social Democracy. Even before the Congress, Martov was generally known as a "soft" Iskraist and Lenin as a "hard." Consequently, those *Iskra* supporters who favored a greater role for non-Iskraists in a unitary party looked to Martov as their natural leader; those wanting the Iskraists to keep a tight control of the party looked to Lenin.

The tension between Lenin's "hards" and Martov's "softs" manifested itself in a series of minor disputes from the very beginning of the Congress. As is well known, this tension exploded over the first paragraph of the rules which defined membership. Martov's draft defined a member as one who "renders it regular personal assistance under the direction of one of its organizations." Lenin's membership criterion was "by personal participation in one of the Party organizations."

Lenin's narrower definition of membership was motivated by both a general desire to exclude opportunists (who were

less likely to accept the rigors and dangers of full organizational participation) and by a desire to weed out dilettantes who had been attracted to Russian Social Democracy precisely because of its loose circle nature. Interestingly, it was Plekhanov who stressed the anti-opportunist aspect of a narrower party, while Lenin emphasized more practical, conjunctural considerations. Here is the heart of Plekhanov's argument:

"Many of the intelligentsia will fear to enter, contaminated as they are with bourgeois individualism; but this is all to the good, since those bourgeois individuals usually constitute representatives of all kinds of opportunism. The opponents of opportunism should therefore vote for Lenin's project, which closes the door to its penetration into the party."

—quoted in Leopold H. Haimson, *The Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism* (1955)

Lenin argued on somewhat different grounds:

"The root of the mistake made by those who stand for Martov's formulation is that they not only ignore one of the main evils of our Party life, but even sanctify it. The evil is that, at a time when political discontent is almost universal, when conditions require our work to be carried out in complete secrecy, and when most of our activities have to be confined to limited, secret circles and even to private meetings, it is extremely difficult, almost impossible in fact, for us to distinguish those who only talk from those who do the work. *There is hardly another country in the world* where the jumbling of these two categories is as common and as productive of such boundless confusion as in Russia.... It would be better if ten who do the work should not call themselves Party members...than that one who only talks should have the right and opportunity to be a Party member. That is a principle which seems to me indisputable, and which compels me to fight against Martov." [our emphasis]

—"Second Speech in the Discussion on the Party Rules" (2 (15) August 1903)

With the support of the Economists, Bundists and centrists, Martov's formulation carried. However, the Economists and Bundists soon thereafter quit the Congress when it refused to accept their respective organizational claims. This gave Lenin's "hards" a slight majority. The decisive split occurred over the election of the *Iskra* editorial board. The old editorial board contained four Martovite "softs" plus Lenin and Plekhanov. Lenin proposed that the board be reduced to three with him and Plekhanov forming a "hard" majority. This proposal was a highly emotional issue since the veterans, Axelrod and Zaslulich, were sentimental favorites in the party. When Lenin's proposal carried, the Martovites refused to serve on either the editorial board or central committee.

Much acrimonious debate centered on whether Lenin had informed Martov of his plan to reduce the editorial board before the Congress, whether Martov agreed, etc. The prehistory of the editorial board fight is unclear because it involved private discussions. What is clear is that Lenin's unwillingness to compromise on the issue derived from the vote on membership criteria. It was definitely Lenin who began the *factional* struggle. He refused to regard the difference on membership criteria as an incidental dispute, but insisted it be made the basis for majority-minority representation on the party's leading bodies.

The period between the Second Congress and the beginning of the revolution of 1905 was marked by the erosion of the Leninist "hard" majority. Throughout this period most of Lenin's political energy was directed against those majority supporters who wanted to restore unity by capitulating to the Mensheviks, reversing the decisions of the Second Congress and liquidating the Bolshevik tendency.

The Mensheviks first counterattacked at a congress of the

Foreign League of Russian Revolutionary Social Democracy in October 1903, where they secured a slight majority. When the League refused to recognize the authority of the leading bodies elected at the Second Congress, the Bolsheviks walked out. This finalized the split.

While Plekhanov supported the Bolshevik faction, he shrank from a definitive split over what appeared to be a purely organizational rather than a principled question. At a Bolshevik caucus meeting in November, he reportedly blurted out: "I cannot fire at my own comrades. Better a bullet in the head than a split" (quoted in Samuel H. Baron, *Plekhanov: Father of Russian Marxism* [1963]). He thereupon used his authority to co-opt to the *Iskra* editorial board the four Martovites from the old board; Lenin resigned in protest.

During 1904, the all-Bolshevik Central Committee, which Lenin joined after resigning from *Iskra*, followed Plekhanov's



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Julius Martov

course. Lenin, believing that his supporters were stronger among the committee men in Russia than among the more intellectual exile milieu, came out for a new party congress to re-establish his majority and recapture the now-Menshevik central organ, *Iskra*. The Central Committee opposed a new congress, co-opted three Mensheviks and effectively expelled Lenin from that body.

In late 1904, Lenin completely broke with the official central party bodies and established a de facto Bolshevik central committee called the Bureau of Majority Committees. At the start of 1905, the Bolsheviks established their own organ, *Vperyod*.

The logic of the factional struggle drove the Mensheviks to the right; gradually they replicated the politics of the defeated Economists. Martov and Plekhanov wrote self-critical articles about the old *Iskra*, stating they had been one-sided (in other words, Leninists) in their attacks on the Economists. The organic fusion of the Mensheviks and Economists was signaled by the co-optation of A.S. Martynov to the editorial board of the new *Iskra*.

The Leninists saw their struggle against the Mensheviks, both politically and organizationally, as a repeat of the fight of *Iskra*ism versus Economism. One of Lenin's lieutenants, Lyadov, instructed a Bolshevik supporter in late 1904 to re-fight the campaign against Economism:

"We are not to leave the party, but to fight for all our worth.... We have to conquer Russia [i.e., the committees] despite the central institutions, and we shall do this in the same way as

*Iskra* once did. We have to repeat the work of *Iskra* and bring it to completion."

—quoted in J.L.H. Keep, *The Rise of Social Democracy in Russia* (1963)

By early 1905, Lenin was convinced the leading Mensheviks were incorrigible and organizationally unprincipled opportunists, and came out for a complete split. In contrast to the policy toward the Economists, Lenin opposed allowing the Menshevik leaders to participate in a new party congress, at which he intended to found a Bolshevik party:

"The [Menshevik] centres may and should be invited, but to accord them voting status is, I repeat, madness. The centres, of course, will not come to our Congress anyway; but why give them another chance to spit in our faces? Why this hypocrisy, this game of hide-and-seek? We bring the split into the open, we call the *Vperyod*-ists to a congress, we want to organise a *Vperyod*-ist party, and we break immediately any and all connections with the disorganizers—and yet we having loyalty dinned into our ears, we are asked to act as though a joint congress of *Iskra* and *Vperyod* were possible." [emphasis in original]

—"Letter to A.A. Bogdanov and S.I. Gusev," 11 February 1905

As Lenin projected, the Mensheviks boycotted the Third (all-Bolshevik) Congress held in London in April 1905 and convened their own rival gathering.

What did Leninism represent in 1904? Above all it represented a firm commitment to revolutionary social democracy, particularly the leading role of the proletarian party in the struggle against tsarist absolutism. It further represented an intransigent attitude toward demonstrated opportunists, like the Economist leaders, and a distrustful attitude toward their possible conversion to revolutionary politics. Lenin was committed to a centralized, disciplined party, and consequently intransigently hostile to the circlism-cliquism characteristic of the Russian social-democratic movement. Apart from the question of membership criteria, these differences between 1904 Bolshevism and Menshevism were difficult to express as counterposed principles. They manifested themselves over concrete organizational matters and appeared to most outsiders (like Kautsky) to represent differences in degree rather than in principle.

### Trotsky's Menshevik Polemic

Among the numerous anti-Lenin diatribes in 1903-04, Trotsky's "Our Political Tasks" was much less significant than those of Axelrod, Plekhanov and Luxemburg. However, because of Trotsky's later authority as a great revolutionary, various reformists and centrists have given prominence to his 1904 polemic. Tony Cliff, longtime leader of the International Socialists (now Socialist Workers Party) of Britain, has devoted a whole essay to Trotsky's "prophecy" that Lenin's organizational conceptions would lead the party to "substitute itself for the working classes" ("Trotsky on Substitutionism," *International Socialism*, Autumn 1960; reprinted in the I.S. collection, *Party and Class* [London, n.d.]). In particular, such left social democrats, claiming that Trotsky foresaw that Leninism must lead to Stalinism, invariably cite the following passage:

"In the internal politics of the party, these [Leninist] methods, as we will see, lead to the party organization replacing the party itself, the central committee [replacing] the party organization and finally a dictator [replacing] the central committee."

—from "Unsere politischen Aufgaben," in Leo Trotzki, *Schriften zur revolutionären Organisation* (Hamburg, 1970)

Conversely, the Stalinists have exploited "Our Political Tasks" to argue that Trotsky's hostility to the Soviet bureaucracy was



nothing but an expression of unregenerate Menshevism.

Apart from a large dose of subjective hostility toward Lenin motivated by a sentimental attachment to the pioneers of Russian Marxism, Trotsky's polemic, like Luxemburg's, is based on an ultra-Kautskyan conception of the party question. He sees the tasks of the party as raising the entire class to social-democratic consciousness through a lengthy, pedagogical process:

"One method consists of taking over the *thinking for the proletariat*, i.e., political substitution for the proletariat; the other consists of political *education* of the proletariat, its political *mobilization*, to exercise concerted pressure on the will of all political groups and parties....

"The party is based on the *given level of consciousness of the proletariat*, and intervenes in every great political event with the aim of shifting the line of development in the direction of the interests of the proletariat; and, even more importantly, with the aim of raising the level of consciousness, in order then to base itself on that raised level of consciousness and again use it to further this dual aim." [emphasis in original]

Trotsky is here strongly influenced by Axelrod, frequently quoted in the polemic, who at this time came out for convening an inclusive, non-party "workers congress." This would, in effect, have liquidated the weak, fledgling RSDRP.

To postpone the revolutionary struggle for power until the entire working class has achieved socialist consciousness is to relegate it "to the Greek calends"; under capitalism, the working class in its overwhelming majority cannot completely transcend bourgeois ideological influence. The revolutionary vanguard party must *lead* the mass of active workers in struggle, but among these workers there are many whose socialist convictions will be partial, inconsistent and episodic.

In his major anti-Menshevik polemic of this period, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back" (May 1904), Lenin replies succinctly to the Axelrod/Trotsky position:

"The Party, as the vanguard of the working class, must not be confused, after all, with the entire class. And Comrade Axelrod is guilty of just this confusion (which is characteristic of our opportunistic Economism in general)....

"We are a party of a class, and therefore *almost the entire class* (and in times of war, in a period of civil war, the entire class) should act under the leadership of our Party, should adhere to the Party as closely as possible. But it would be... 'tail-ism' to think that the entire class, or almost the entire class, can ever rise, under capitalism, to the level of consciousness and activity of its vanguard, of its Social-Democratic Party." [emphasis in original]

It should be noted that Lenin's formulation of class-party relations here still does not completely break with the Kautskyan "party of the whole class" since he obviously assumes only a single party based on the proletariat.

It is not substitutionism for a revolutionary party to lead—through the trade unions, factory committees, soviets, etc.—masses of workers who are not conscious socialists. This is precisely the task of the revolutionary vanguard. Substitution-



Leon Trotsky

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ism is when the vanguard engages in *military* action against the bourgeoisie without the support of the non-party masses. Substitutionism manifests itself in putschism, terrorism/guerrillaism, dual unionism or minority attempts at general strike action (like the German March Action of 1921). Despite repeated Menshevik accusations of Blanquism, Lenin's Bolsheviks did not engage in such adventurist activities. By the eve of World War I the Bolsheviks had become the mass party of the Russian industrial proletariat, far outstripping the ill-organized, disparate Mensheviks.

In any case, those who would use the early Trotsky's polemic against Leninism must come to terms with Trotsky's own later renunciation and critique of his Menshevik and conciliationist position in those years. In *My Life* (1929) he wrote of the 1903 RSDRP congress:

"My break with Lenin occurred on what might be considered 'moral' or even personal grounds. But this was merely on the surface. At bottom,

the separation was of a political nature and merely expressed itself in the realm of organization methods. I thought of myself as a centralist. But there is no doubt that at that time I did not fully realize what an intense and imperious centralism the revolutionary party would need to lead millions of people in a war against the old order."

Trotsky never authorized a reprinting of "Our Political Tasks," and it was explicitly not included in the Russian edition of his works published before the Stalinist usurpation.

### Behind Luxemburg's Anti-Leninist Polemic

Rosa Luxemburg's "Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy," published in the SPD theoretical journal *Neue Zeit* and the Menshevik *Iskra*, is probably the most intrinsically significant of the anti-Lenin polemics following the 1903 split. It stands back from the immediate issues and personal recriminations of the split, and it does not engage in superficial unity mongering. Luxemburg's differences with Lenin exist both at the level of the problems, tasks and perspectives of the Russian movement and of the organizational nature of social democracy in general. In both the Russian and general cases these differences center on the nature of opportunism and how to combat it.

Their differences over social-democratic opportunism in *Russia* can be briefly expressed as follows. Before the 1905 Revolution, Lenin saw the main opportunist danger as adaptation to tsarist absolutism; Luxemburg saw it as the subordination of the Russian proletariat to revolutionary bourgeois democracy out of power. For Lenin, a social-democratic opportunist was a dilettante quick to make a personal peace with tsarist society, and perhaps an aspiring trade-union official. For Luxemburg, a social-democratic opportunist was a bourgeois radical demagogue actually striving for governmental power, a Russian version of the French Radical leader Georges Clemenceau, an ex-Blanquist.

For Lenin from 1901 through 1904, and for the *Iskra*



tendency as a whole, the main expression of Russian social-democratic opportunism was Economism, an amalgam of minimalist trade-union agitation, passive adaptation to liberal tsarism, organizational localism and individualistic functioning. Luxemburg was no less opposed to pure-and-simple trade unionism than was Lenin, but evidently did not regard Economism as a serious opportunist current in Russia, as a serious contender for influence over the working class. As for the circle spirit and anarchistic individualism which Lenin took as his main enemy at the organization level, Luxemburg seemed to consider these traits an unavoidable overhead cost at the given stage of the social-democratic movement in Russia. When the socialist proletariat is small, believed Luxemburg, a loose movement of localized propaganda circles is the normal and, in a sense, healthy organizational expression of social democracy:

"How to effect a transition from the type of organization characteristic of the preparatory stage of the socialist movement—usually featured by disconnected local groups and clubs, with propaganda as a principal activity—to the unity of a large, national body, suitable for concerted political action over the entire vast territory ruled by the Russian state? That is the specific problem which the Russian Social Democracy has mulled over for some time.

"Autonomy and isolation are the most pronounced characteristics of the old organizational type. It is, therefore, understandable why the slogan of the persons who want to see an inclusive national organization should be 'Centralism!' ...

"The indispensable conditions for the realization of Social-Democratic centralism are: 1. The existence of a large contingent of workers educated in the political struggle. 2. The possibility for the workers to develop their own political activity through direct influence on public life, in a party press, and public congresses, etc.

"These conditions are *not yet* fully formed in Russia. The first—a proletarian vanguard, conscious of its class interests and capable of self-direction in political activity—is only now emerging in Russia. All efforts of socialist agitation and organization should aim to hasten the formation of such a vanguard. The second condition can be had only under a regime of political liberty." [our emphasis]

—Luxemburg, "Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy"

Luxemburg's belief in the *gradual* transition from a movement of localized circles to a centralized, unitary party was not only counterposed to Leninism, but logically placed her outside and to the right of the pre-split *Iskra* tendency as a whole.

The view expressed above is at some variance with Luxemburg's actual organizational *practice* in the Polish part of the Russian empire. The Luxemburg/Jogiches Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL) was a very small, but highly centralized, propaganda organization. And, unlike Lenin's Bolsheviks, Luxemburg's SDKPiL made serious sectarian and ultraleft errors (see "Lenin vs. Luxemburg on the National Question," WV No. 150, 25 March 1977).

Mention of the SDKPiL is a reminder that one cannot simply take "Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy" at face value. Though from very different motivations, Luxemburg's Polish social democracy was just as protective of its organizational autonomy as was the Bund. The SDKPiL sent two observers to the Second RSDRP Congress, where they negotiated for broad autonomy within an all-Russian party. Lenin's advocacy of a centralized party of all social democrats in the Russian empire challenged, at least in principle, the highly valued organizational autonomy of Luxemburg's SDKPiL.

Luxemburg looked for Russian social-democratic opportunism in exactly the opposite direction than did Lenin. Luxemburg feared that the Russian social-democratic intelligentsia would give rise to a radical bourgeois party using socialist rhetoric, and thus suppress the development of political class consciousness among the Russian proletariat. With this prognosis, Luxemburg saw in Lenin's centralism, rather than in Menshevism, the most likely source of opportunism (i.e., adaptation to the bourgeoisie). Lenin's insistence on the leading role of social democracy in the struggle against absolutism and on the leading role of professional revolutionaries in the party appeared to Luxemburg (and not only to her) as characteristic of a *bourgeois* radical party.

In fact, it was common in Menshevik circles in this period to accuse the Leninists of being bourgeois radicals in social-democratic clothing. The leading Menshevik, Potresov, for example, likened the Bolsheviks to Clemenceau's Radicals. Luxemburg saw in Lenin's "Jacobinism" the unconscious desire of radical bourgeois intellectuals to suppress their working-class base *after* overthrowing tsarism and coming to power. She advocated a broad, loose social-democratic movement as a curb on radical bourgeois demagogues à la Clemenceau the ex-Blanquist:

"If we assume the viewpoint claimed as his own by Lenin and we fear the influence of intellectuals in the proletarian movement, we can conceive of no greater danger to the Russian party than Lenin's organizational plan. Nothing will more surely enslave a *young* labor movement to an *intellectual elite hungry for power* than this bureaucratic strait jacket....

"Let us not forget that the revolution soon to break in Russia will be a bourgeois and not a proletarian revolution. This modifies radically all the conditions of proletarian struggle. The Russian intellectuals, too, will rapidly become imbued with bourgeois ideology. The Social Democracy is at present the only guide of the Russian proletariat. But on the day *after* the revolution, we shall see the bourgeoisie, and above all the bourgeois intellectuals, seek to use the masses as a stepping-stone to their domination.

"The game of *bourgeois demagogues* will be made easier if at the present stage, the spontaneous action, initiative, and political sense of the advanced sections of the working class are hindered in their development and restricted by the protectorate of an authoritarian Central Committee." [our emphasis]

—*Ibid.*

A central premise of Luxemburg's 1904 anti-Leninist polemic was that tsarist absolutism would soon be replaced by bourgeois democracy ("the revolution soon to break out in Russia will be bourgeois"). That is why she anticipated that radical parliamentary demagoguery would be the principal expression of social-democratic opportunism. The revolution of 1905 proved Luxemburg's prognosis wrong. The revolution demonstrated that bourgeois liberalism was totally cowardly and impotent. It also demonstrated that social democracy was the only consistently revolutionary-democratic force in the Russian empire.

During the revolution, Luxemburg condemned the Mensheviks for tailing the constitutional monarchists (the Cadets) and moved close to the Bolsheviks. Agreeing with Lenin on the leading role of the proletarian party in the anti-tsarist revolution, Luxemburg/Jogiches' SDKPiL formed an alliance with the Bolsheviks in 1906, an alliance which lasted until 1912 and gave Lenin leadership of the formally unitary RSDRP. At the Fifth RSDRP Congress in 1907, Luxemburg defended the narrowness and intransigence of the Bolsheviks, albeit with "soft" reservations:

"You comrades on the right-wing complain bitterly about the narrowness, the intolerance, the tendency toward mechanical



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## Rosa Luxemburg

conception in the attitudes of the Bolsheviks. And we agree with you.... But do you know what causes these unpleasant tendencies? To anyone familiar with party conditions in other countries, these tendencies are quite well known: it is the typical attitude of one section of Socialism which has to defend the independent class interests of the proletariat against another equally strong section. Rigidity is the form adopted by Social Democracy at one end when the other tends to turn into formless jelly, unable to maintain any consistent course under the pressure of events."

—quoted in J.P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg* (1966)

Liberals and social democrats have systematically suppressed reference to Luxemburg's close alliance with Bolshevism from the revolution of 1905 until 1912 and again from the outbreak of World War I until her assassination during the Spartakist uprising in 1919. They have, however, fully exploited her 1904 polemic in the service of anti-communism. Thus, the widely circulated Ann Arbor Paperbacks for the Study of Communism and Marxism reprinted "Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy" under the slanderous title "Leninism or Marxism?"

No less pernicious have been the efforts of many left-reformists and centrists to portray the Leninist democratic-centralist vanguard party as valid *only* for backward countries, while solidarizing with Luxemburg's 1904 anti-Bolshevik position for advanced capitalist countries. We have already noted that this was exactly the position of the reformist-workerist Tony Cliff, before "hard" Leninism became fashionable among radical youth in the late 1960s.

It is to be expected that an outright revisionist like Cliff would solidarize with Luxemburg against Lenin. What is not expected is that an ostensibly orthodox Trotskyist (i.e., Leninist) organization would adopt the "Luxemburgist" line as valid for advanced countries. Yet this is just what the French Organisation Communiste Internationaliste (OCI) does. In an introduction to a popular French edition of *What*

*Is To Be Done?* OCI leader Jean-Jacques Marie dismisses Lenin's advocacy of a democratic-centralist vanguard as peculiar to early twentieth-century Russia, and asserts that Luxemburg's 1904 position is appropriate to an advanced country with a highly developed workers movement.

"The centralist rigidity of *What Is To Be Done?* is linked to the particular characteristics of the Russian proletariat; that is to say, of a nascent proletariat which had just recently come out of the countryside impregnated with the traits of the Middle Ages, lacking education, crushed by conditions of existence similar to those of the French or English proletariat at the beginning of the nineteenth century....

"The role of the revolutionary intelligentsia as a factor of organization and consciousness, such as Lenin depicted it, is thus proportional to the degree of relative backwardness of a proletariat legally deprived of any form of trade-union or political organization.

"Thus the conflict between Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, for example, appears—if you leave aside their personal traits—as the expression of the enormous difference which separated one of the most uneducated proletariats in Europe and the German proletariat, at that time the most powerful and politically most vigorous and mature in the world....

"If the struggle for the socialist revolution is international in essence, its immediate forms and also the means to lead it depend on numerous factors, among them the national conditions in which each party matures."

—introduction to *Que Faire?* (Paris, 1966)

The viewpoint which J.-J. Marie here attributes to Luxemburg is so diametrically opposed to her actual position it is hard to believe he has ever read "Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy." As we have seen, Luxemburg's opposition to Leninist centralism *for Russia* was predicated precisely on the *underdevelopment* of the proletarian movement. In 1904, Luxemburg was a centralizer and disciplinarian in the German party because the revisionist right was formally a minority. And this is explicitly stated in "Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy":

"The Social Democracy must enclose the tumult of the non-proletarian protestants against the existing society within the bounds of the revolutionary action of the proletariat....

"This is only possible if the Social Democracy already contains a strong, politically educated proletarian nucleus class conscious enough to be able, as up to now in Germany, to pull along in its tow the declassed and petty-bourgeois elements that join the party. In that case, *greater strictness* in the application of the *principle of centralization and more severe discipline*, specifically formulated in party bylaws, may be an effective safeguard against the opportunist danger. That is how the revolutionary socialist movement in France defended itself against the Juarèsist confusion. A modification of the constitution of the German Social Democracy in that direction would be a very timely measure." [our emphasis]

Luxemburg's pressure for greater centralization in the SPD was successful at the radical-dominated 1905 Jena Congress, which adopted a genuinely centralist organizational structure. For the first time the officers of the basic party unit were made responsible to the national executive. Later on, of course, the SPD's famous centralized apparatus was used to suppress the revolutionary left led by Rosa Luxemburg.

The heart of the differences between Luxemburg and Lenin in 1904 and also later did *not* center on the degree of centralization, but on the nature of opportunism and how to combat it. The question of centralism and discipline derives its significance only in that context.

Luxemburg's 1904 anti-Lenin polemic was strongly conditioned by frustration at her essentially hollow victory over Bernsteinian revisionism. Revisionism was formally rejected by the SPD, the opportunists changed their tack and the



party political activities continued much the same as before, in the spirit of passive expectancy. Not long after writing "Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy," Luxemburg expressed in a letter (14 December 1904) to the Dutch left socialist Henriette Roland-Holst her disillusionment with internal factional struggle in general:

"Opportunism is in any case a swamp plant, which develops rapidly and luxuriously in the stagnant waters of the movement; in a swift running stream it will die of itself. Here in Germany a forward motion is an urgent, burning need! And only the fewest realize it. Some fritter away their energy in petty disputes with the opportunists, others believe that the automatic, mechanical increase in numbers (at elections and in the organizations) is progress in itself!"

—quoted in Carl E. Schorske, *German Social Democracy 1905-1917* (1955)

Luxemburg's belief that an upsurge of militant class struggle would naturally dispel the opportunist forces in the SPD proved very wrong. In 1905 and again in 1910 a rising line of mass agitation against restricted suffrage was effectively suppressed on the initiative of the trade-union bureaucracy. In 1910 the *Neue Zeit*, under Kautsky's editorship, even refused to publish Luxemburg's article advocating a general strike.

In concluding "Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy," Luxemburg develops a theory of the inevitability of opportunism and even opportunist phases in a social-democratic party. Attempts to preserve the party against opportunism through internal *organizational* means will, she contends, only reduce the party to a sect. Herein lies Luxemburg's fundamental difference with Lenin in 1904 and later:

"It follows that this movement can best advance by tacking betwixt and between the two dangers by which it is constantly threatened. One is the loss of its mass character; the other, the abandonment of its goal. One is the danger of sinking back to the condition of a sect; the other, the danger of becoming a movement of social reform.

"That is why it is illusory, and contrary to historic experience, to hope to fix, once for all, the direction of the revolutionary socialist struggle with the aid of formal means, which are expected to secure the labor movement against all possibilities of opportunist digression.

"Marxist theory offers us a reliable instrument enabling us to recognize and combat typical manifestations of opportunism. But the socialist movement is a mass movement. Its perils are not the insidious machinations of individuals and groups. They arise out of unavoidable social conditions. We cannot secure ourselves in advance against all possibilities of opportunist deviation. Such dangers can be overcome only by the movement itself—certainly with the aid of Marxist theory, but only after the dangers in question have taken tangible form in practice.

"Looked at from this angle, opportunism appears to be a product and an inevitable phase of the historic development of the labor movement."

Due to attempts by semi-syndicalist and ultraleft communist elements (e.g., "council communists") to claim Rosa Luxemburg as one of their own, it is often ignored that her polemic against Lenin on the organizational question was rooted in orthodox social-democratic concepts. The above-quoted passage is ultra-Kautskyan in identifying the social-democratic party with the entire labor movement. From the premise of Kautsky's "party of the whole class," Luxemburg's logic is unassailable. Not only is there an opportunist wing of a social-democratic party, but there must be periods in which the influence of this wing is expanding.

From her German vantage point, Luxemburg saw that to form a Leninist party must mean a break with significant working-class tendencies under opportunist leadership

and influence. This anti-social-democratic conclusion was blocked from Lenin's view by the *unorganized* state of the Russian party. In contrast to Luxemburg, Lenin was not faced with opportunist social-democratic tendencies which enjoyed a mass base. He believed the Mensheviks to be an intellectualist tendency incapable of building a mass workers movement.

## Kautsky/Bebel Intervene to Restore Unity

While Luxemburg's 1904 anti-Leninist polemic is today far better known, at that time the active pro-unity intervention of the SPD central leadership, Kautsky and Bebel, was more significant. It is important to consider Kautsky/Bebel's intervention in order to realize that Lenin built a programmatically homogeneous revolutionary party in Russia in the face of opposition from the leading authorities of the Socialist International.

In early 1904, one of Lenin's lieutenants, Lydin-Mandelstamm, wrote an article on the split for publication in Kautsky's *Neue Zeit*. Kautsky refused to publish it, and his reply to Lydin in mid-May 1904 is his earliest written statement on the split. He found the split entirely unjustified and profoundly irresponsible. He was also astute enough to recognize that it was Lenin's intransigence on the organizational question which perpetuated the split:

"Great responsibility rests upon the Russian social democracy. If it cannot unite, then it will stand before history and the international proletariat as a group of politicians which, out of personal and organizational difficulties of a very minor nature compared with its great historic task...has let slip an opportunity for striking a blow at Russian absolutism. But Lenin would bear the responsibility for having initiated this destructive discord." [our translation]

—quoted in Dietrich Geyer, "Die russische Parteispaltung im Urteil der deutschen Sozialdemokratie 1903-1905," in *International Review of Social History* (1958)

On the substantive organizational question which led to the split, Kautsky saw "neither a principled opposition between the needs of the proletariat and intellectuals nor between democracy and dictatorship, but rather simply a question of appropriateness."

Kautsky sent a copy of his reply to Lydin to the Menshevik leadership, who rightly regarded it as support to their side. With the author's permission, it was published in the new *Iskra*. In a letter (4 June 1904) to Axelrod, Kautsky deepened his pro-Menshevik stance to the point of giving them advice on how to best Lenin:

"But to a great degree the differences between you and the other side seem to rest upon misunderstandings. Not between you and Lenin, that I consider out of the question, but between you and Lenin's supporters in Russia. I have at least had the opportunity of conversing with various supporters of Lenin who came from Russia and I have found among them no views which would render cooperation...impossible. Their prejudice against you seems often only to rest on misinformation. If this is so, then unification would have to be possible, over and above Lenin's head, if these elements are treated judiciously."

—*Ibid.*

And, in fact, the Mensheviks sought, with some success, to win over the more conciliatory Bolsheviks.

A more public indication of Kautsky's anti-Lenin stance was that *Neue Zeit* published Luxemburg's "Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy" without dissociating the journal from the views expressed therein. When Lenin wrote a reply, Kautsky refused to publish it on the grounds that *Neue Zeit* was not the appropriate arena to fight

out the RSDRP split. In a letter (27 October 1904) to Lenin, he justified publishing Luxemburg's article by asserting that: "I did not publish Rosa Luxemburg's article *because* it treated the Russian disputes but *in spite of this*. I published it because it treated the organizational question *theoretically*, and this question is also a subject of discussion with us in Germany. The Russian disputes are touched on there only in a fashion that will not draw the uninformed reader's attention to them. [emphasis in original]"

—*Ibid.*

Kautsky's last assertion is disingenuous.

Kautsky advised Lenin to recast his reply in more theoretical terms if he wanted it published in the German organ. So far as we know, Lenin did not reply. One presumes Lenin regarded as decisive the specifics of the RSDRP split and didn't want to be drawn into an abstract discussion on principles of organization.

In October 1904, August Bebel, the venerated chairman of the SPD, proposed to the Menshevik leadership that they call a unity conference of all the groups present at the Second Congress of the RSDRP. Shortly thereafter, the German leadership urged a *far broader* conference including the petty-bourgeois populist Social Revolutionaries and national-liberationist Polish Socialist Party. Thus in 1904 the German Social Democratic leadership favored a bloc, if not a party, embracing all the oppositional forces in the tsarist empire to the left of the bourgeois liberals. The Mensheviks rejected such a broad unity as opportunist. This was an early indication that the Martovites were *not*, as Lenin mistakenly believed, to the right of the SPD central leadership.

Kautsky believed that the Mensheviks were as desirous of restoring unity as he was. But the Mensheviks' pro-unity stance was in part a pose for foreign consumption. In theory committed to a broad, inclusive party, the Menshevik leadership did not want to be in the same organization with Lenin's "hards." In response to Bebel's proposal, they agreed to call a "unity" conference inviting the Bund, Luxemburg/Jogiches' SDKPiL and some smaller social-democratic groups. But they *refused* to invite the Leninists! By this time Lenin had lost the former leadership of the RSDRP and had set up the Bureau of Majority Committees.

Kautsky now criticized the Menshevik leaders as irresponsible splitters. In a letter (10 January 1905) to Axelrod, he wrote:

"I don't understand your not inviting Lenin. This may well be justified on *formal* grounds, but one cannot view the matter so

formally. From a *political* standpoint the exclusion [of Lenin] from the invitation seems to me an error. Even if he does not formally represent a particular organization, still he has a great deal of support, and your task is either to win him along with his supporters or separate these supporters from him.... In the present situation, which demands a unity of all revolutionary forces, it is my view that your task is to go the utmost in conciliation. If unity is then demonstrated to be impossible, then Lenin will have placed himself in a bad light, then you can proceed against him with much greater force and success than at present, where your conflict appears almost solely one simply of authority." [emphasis in original]

—*Ibid.*

Following the Bloody Sunday massacre in January 1905, the SPD leadership once again attempted to reunite the Russian social-democratic movement. Bebel publicly offered to arbitrate the differences. Bebel's offer concluded with a paternalistic scolding of Russian Social Democracy:

"The news about this split has stirred up great confusion and definite discontent in the international social democracy and everybody expects that after a free discussion both sides will find a common basis for struggle against the common enemy."

—quoted in Olga Hess Gankin and H.H. Fisher, *The Bolsheviks and the World War* (1940)

The Mensheviks, knowing Bebel was close to them politically, readily accepted his proposal. Lenin in effect rejected the unity proposal. In a reply (7 February 1905) to the German party chairman, he stated that he had no authority to accept the arbitration offer, which had to be put to a new party congress. He then added that in view of Kautsky's one-sided intervention, "it will not surprise me if intervention on the part of representatives of the German Social Democracy encounters difficulties within our ranks."

The all-Bolshevik Third Congress in April took no position on Bebel's proposal, in effect rejecting it. The Bolsheviks' self-confident spirit and unwillingness to accept German tutelage is well expressed by the delegate Barsov in his speech on Bebel's offer:

"Our German comrades are a force, they have matured through an inexorably critical, internal struggle against all forms of opportunism at party congresses and other meetings—and we must mature in the same way in order to play our great role, independently forging our own organizations into a party, not merely ideologically but in reality.... We must become active leaders of the entire proletarian class of Russia, by uniting and organizing ourselves immediately for struggle against autocracy for the glorious future of the reign of socialism."

—*Ibid.*

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# The 1905 Revolution



During 1904, Russian defeats in the war with Japan provoked a surge of liberal bourgeois opposition to the tsarist autocracy. This significant change in the Russian political scene deepened the differences between Menshevism and Bolshevism. Assigning the liberals the leading role in the coming anti-tsarist revolution, the Mensheviks sought to encourage the liberal opposition by toning down criticism of them. The Mensheviks' conciliatory attitude to the liberals marked a further regression down the same path as the Economists, restricting the social-democratic party to the defense of the sectional interests of the Russian proletariat.

Lenin sharply attacked this liberal-conciliationist policy in his November 1904 article, "The Zemstvo Campaign and *Iskra's* Plan," which opened up a new, more profound phase in the Bolshevik-Menshevik conflict. (The *Zemstvos* were local government bodies through which the liberals sought to reform tsarism.) The heart of Lenin's polemic is this:

"Bourgeois democrats are by their very nature incapable of satisfying these [revolutionary-democratic] demands, and are therefore, doomed to irresolution and half-heartedness. By criticizing this half-heartedness, the Social-Democrats keep prodding the liberals on and winning more and more proletarians and semi-proletarians, and partly petty bourgeois too, from liberal democracy to working-class democracy....

"The bourgeois opposition is merely bourgeois and merely an opposition because it does not itself fight, because it has no program of its own that it unconditionally upholds, because it stands between the two actual combatants (the government and the revolutionary proletariat with its handful of intellectual supporters) and hopes to turn the outcome of the struggle to its own advantage."

This difference over the role of the liberal bourgeoisie in the anti-tsarist revolution was the main issue at the rival Menshevik and Bolshevik gatherings in April 1905. From their premise that the liberal bourgeois party must come to power with the overthrow of absolutism, the Mensheviks derived the position that the social-democratic party, no matter how strong, ought not to militarily overthrow the tsarist government. This policy of passive expectancy and liberal tailism was adopted in resolution form at the April Menshevik conference:

"Under these conditions, social democracy must strive to retain for itself, throughout the entire revolution, a position which would best afford it the opportunity of furthering the revolution, which would not bind its hands in the struggle against the inconsistent and self-seeking policies of the bourgeois parties, and which would prevent it from losing its identity in bourgeois democracy.

"Therefore, social democracy should not set itself the goal of seizing or sharing power in the provisional government but must remain a party of the extreme revolutionary opposition."

—Robert H. McNeal, ed., *Decisions and Resolutions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (1974)

Lenin counterposed to the Menshevik conception the "revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry," a concept most extensively set forth in his July 1905 pamphlet, *Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution*. Lenin began from the premise that the Russian bourgeoisie was incapable of carrying through the historic tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution. However, he believed that a peasant-based radical populist movement could and would give rise to a mass revolutionary-democratic party. (Significantly Lenin did *not* consider the Social Revolutionaries such a party. He regarded them as an "intellectualist" grouping, still addicted to terrorism.) The alliance between the peasant-based revolutionary-democratic and the proletarian social-democratic party, including a coalition "provisional revolutionary government," would overthrow absolutism and carry through a radical democratic program—the "minimum" program of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDRP). The operational core of Lenin's strategy was adopted at the all-Bolshevik Third RSDRP Congress:

"Depending upon the alignment of forces and other factors which cannot be precisely defined in advance, representatives of our party may be allowed to take part in the provisional revolutionary government so as to conduct a relentless struggle against all counter-revolutionary attempts and to uphold the independent interests of the working class."

—*Ibid.*

In developing the concept of the "revolutionary-democratic dictatorship," Lenin was primarily concerned with motivating an active military and political role for Russian social democracy in the revolution. As to the future fate of the "revolutionary-democratic dictatorship," Lenin is deliberately vague; it is clear he did not regard it as a stable form of class rule. In *Two Tactics* he asserts:

"The revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry is unquestionably only a transient, temporary socialist aim, but to ignore this aim in the period of a democratic revolution would be downright reactionary."

The future evolution of Russian society from the "revolutionary-democratic dictatorship" would be determined by the balance of class forces not only in Russia but throughout Europe. Lenin's formulation is therefore an *algebraic* conception. In its most revolutionary outcome it would shade over toward Trotsky's "permanent revolution": a radical democratic revolution in Russia sparks the European proletarian revolution, which allows the immediate socialist revolution in Russia. In the face of triumphant reaction the "revolutionary-democratic dictatorship" becomes a revolutionary episode, somewhat akin to the Jacobin dictatorship of 1793 or Paris Commune of 1871, which makes possible the stabilization of normal bourgeois-democratic rule.

By early 1905, the issue of the political dynamic of the revolution had superseded the narrow organizational question as the central conflict between Bolshevism and Menshevism. In fact, the criticism of the Mensheviks adopted at the April 1905 Bolshevik congress did not even mention the issue which caused the original split. Rather it condemned the Mensheviks for economism and liberal tailism:

"...a general tendency to belittle the significance of consciousness, which they subordinate to spontaneity, in the proletarian struggle.... In tactical matters [the Mensheviks] manifest a desire to narrow the scope of the party work; speaking out against the party pursuing completely independent tactics in relation to the bourgeois-liberal parties, against the possibility and desirability of our party undertaking an organizational role in the popular uprising, and against the party's participation



Dietz Verlag Berlin

**Bloody Sunday, 9 January 1905: workers marched to Winter Palace to present petition to Tsar Nicholas II. Without warning guards fired on crowd killing 500 and wounding 3,000.**

under any conditions in a provisional democratic-revolutionary government."

As is well known, not all the leading Mensheviks of 1903 became the liberal-tailists of 1905. During 1904 the young Trotsky developed the theory of the "permanent revolution" as applied to Russia. Due to Russia's uneven development, no revolutionary bourgeois-democratic force, including a peasant-based radical populist party, would emerge to overthrow absolutism. In carrying through the anti-absolutist revolution, the proletarian party would be forced to take state power and also to introduce the beginnings of socialization. Unless the Russian proletarian revolution extended itself to advanced capitalist Europe, the backward workers state would inevitably be overthrown by imperialist reaction. Trotsky's "permanent revolution" position placed him to the left of the Leninists on the question of revolutionary strategy, but, except for a historic moment in 1905, he remained an isolated figure in the pre-war Russian social-democratic movement.

## Revolution and Mass Recruitment

The differences with the Mensheviks over the nature of the Russian revolution weakened, but did not eliminate, the Bolshevik conciliators, who favored reunification of the RSDRP. However, the revolutionary upsurge produced a new division within the Bolshevik camp, and this time Lenin found himself taking an unfamiliar position on the organizational question.

The mass radicalization, particularly after Bloody Sunday, 9 January 1905, produced tens of thousands of militant young workers who were willing to join a revolutionary socialist party, to join the Bolsheviks. However, habituated to a small underground network, many Bolshevik "committeemen" (the cadres who had built hard-core social-democratic cells in the difficult conditions of clandestinity) resisted a radical change in the nature of their organization and its functioning. They opposed a mass recruitment policy and insisted on continuing a lengthy period of tutelage as a precondition for membership.

Lenin adamantly opposed this apparatus conservatism and sought to transform the Bolsheviks from an agitational organization into a mass proletarian party. As early as February 1905, in an article "New Forces and New Tasks," Lenin expressed concern that the radicalization of the masses was far outstripping the growth of the Bolshevik organization:

"We must considerably increase the membership of all Party and Party-connected organizations in order to be able to keep up to some extent with the stream of popular revolutionary energy which has been a hundredfold strengthened. This, it goes without saying, does not mean that consistent training and systematic instruction in the Marxist truths are to be left in the shade. We must, however, remember that at the present time far greater significance in the matter of training and education attaches to the military operations, which *teach* the untrained precisely and entirely in *our* sense. We must remember that our 'doctrinaire' faithfulness to Marxism is now being reinforced by the march of revolutionary events, which is everywhere furnishing *object lessons to the masses* and that all these lessons confirm precisely our dogma....

"Young fighters should be recruited more boldly, widely and rapidly into the ranks of *all and every kind* of our organizations. *Hundreds* of new organizations should be set up for the purpose without a moment's delay. Yes, hundreds; this is no hyperbole, and let no one tell me that it is 'too late' now to tackle such a broad organizational task. No, it is never too late to organize. We must use the freedom we are getting by law and the freedom we are taking despite the law to strengthen and multiply the Party organizations of all varieties." [emphasis in original]

The conflict between Lenin's mass recruitment policy and the conservative committeemen was one of the most heated issues of the April 1905 Bolshevik congress. Lenin's motion on the subject was actually voted down by a slim majority. This motion calls upon the Bolsheviks to

"make every effort to strengthen the ties between the Party and the masses of the working class by raising still wider sections of the proletarians to full Social-Democratic consciousness, by developing their revolutionary Social-Democratic activity, by seeing to it that the greatest possible number of workers capable of leading the movement and the Party organizations be advanced from among the mass of the working class to membership on the local centers and on the all-Party center through the creation of a maximum number of working-class organizations adhering to our Party...."

—"Draft Resolution on the Relations Between Workers and Intellectuals Within the Social-Democratic Organizations," April 1905

In opposing a mass recruitment policy, the conservative Bolshevik committeemen quoted *What Is To Be Done?* with its line of "the narrower, the better." Lenin replied that the 1902 polemic sought to guide the formation of an oppositional grouping within a politically heterogeneous movement of underground propaganda circles. The tasks facing the Bolshevik organization in early 1905 were, to say the least, different.

Lenin was absolutely right to oppose a conservative attitude toward recruitment during the revolution of 1905. If the tens of thousands of subjectively revolutionary, but politically raw, young workers who came to the fore were not recruited to the Bolsheviks, they would naturally join the opportunist Mensheviks, the radical-populist Social Revolutionaries or the anarchists. The revolutionary party would be deprived of a large and important proletarian generation. Without mass recruitment the Bolshevik Party would have been sterilized during the Revolution and thereafter.

Another aspect of the Bolshevik committeemen's apparatus conservatism was a sectarian attitude toward the mass organizations thrown up by the revolution—the trade unions





David King Collection

Members of the St. Petersburg Soviet during 1906 trial.

and, above all, the soviets. The key St. Petersburg Soviet [council] of Workers' Deputies originated in October 1905 as a centralized general strike committee. While the Mensheviks embraced the trade unions and soviets precisely because of their loose, politically heterogeneous nature, a section of the Bolshevik leadership distrusted such organizations as competitors to the party.

Thus in October 1905 the Bolshevik Central Committee in Russia (Lenin was still in exile) addressed a "Letter to All Party Organizations" which stated:

"Every such organization represents a certain stage in the proletariat's political development, but if it stands outside Social Democracy, it is, objectively, in danger of keeping the proletariat on a primitive political level and thus subjugating it to the bourgeois parties."

—quoted in Tony Cliff, *Lenin, Vol. I: Building the Party* (1975)

The Bolsheviks' initial sectarian attitude toward the soviets permitted the Mensheviks to play a leading role in them by filling a political vacuum. Thus Trotsky, as head of the St. Petersburg Soviet, emerged as the most prominent revolutionary socialist in 1905.

Just as he struggled for a mass recruitment policy, so Lenin intervened to correct a sectarian abstentionist attitude toward the soviets. In a letter to the Bolshevik press entitled "Our Tasks and the Soviet of Workers' Deputies" (November 1905) he wrote:

"The Soviet of Workers' Deputies or the Party? I think it would be wrong to put the question in this way and that the decision must *certainly* be: *both* the Soviet of Workers' Deputies and the Party. The only question—and a highly important one—is how to divide, and how to combine, the tasks of the Soviet and those of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party.

"I think it would be inadvisable for the Soviet to adhere wholly to any one party." [emphasis in original]

Like Trotsky, Lenin recognized in the soviets the organizational basis for a revolutionary government:

"To my mind, the Soviet of Workers' Deputies, as a revolutionary center providing political leadership, is not too broad an organization but, on the contrary, a much too narrow one. The Soviet must proclaim itself the provisional revolutionary government, or form such a government, and by all means enlist to

this end the participation of new deputies not only from the workers, but, first of all, from the sailors and soldiers...; secondly, from the revolutionary peasantry, and thirdly, from the revolutionary bourgeois intelligentsia. The Soviet must select a strong nucleus for the provisional revolutionary government and reinforce it with representatives of all revolutionary parties and all revolutionary (but, of course, only revolutionary and not liberal) democrats."

—*Ibid.*

Lenin's positive orientation toward the trade unions and soviets in 1905 did *not* represent a change in his previous position on the vanguard party. On the contrary, the concept of the vanguard party presupposes and indeed requires very broad organizations through which the party can lead the mass of more backward workers. *What Is To Be Done?* states very clearly the relationship of the party to the trade unions:

"The workers' organizations for the economic struggle should be trade-union organizations. Every Social-Democratic worker should as far as possible assist and actively work in these organizations. But, while this is true, it is certainly not in our interest to demand that only Social-Democrats should be eligible for membership in the 'trade' unions, since that would only narrow the scope of our influence upon the masses. Let every worker who understands the need to unite for the struggle against the employers and the government join the trade unions. The very aim of the trade unions would be impossible of achievement, if they did not unite all who have attained at least this elementary degree of understanding, if they were not *very* broad organizations. The broader these organizations, the broader will be our degree of influence over them." [emphasis in original]

### Did Lenin Renounce *What Is To Be Done?*

Almost every rightist revisionist has zeroed in on Lenin's fight for a mass recruitment policy and against apparatus conservatism to argue that the founder of contemporary communism abandoned the principles of *What Is To Be Done?* then and for all time. The British workerist-reformist Tony Cliff concludes that in 1905:

"On the idea that socialist consciousness could be brought in only from the 'outside,' and that the working class could spontaneously achieve only trade-union consciousness, Lenin now formulated his conclusion in terms which were the exact opposite of those of *What Is To Be Done?* In an article called 'The

Reorganization of the Party' written in November 1905, he says bluntly: 'The working class is instinctively, spontaneously Social Democratic'."

—Op. cit.

Jean-Jacques Marie, a leader of the French neo-Kautskyan Organisation Communiste Internationaliste, says practically the same thing:

"Lenin abandoned the rigidity in the definition which he had given of the relationship between 'consciousness' and 'spontaneity.' After the Second Congress (August 1903) he indicated that he had 'forced the note' or 'took the stick bent by the Economists and bent it the other way.' The 1905 Revolution could only force him to underline *What Is To Be Done?*'s historical function for a particular moment."

—introduction to *Que Faire?* (1966)

Because all manner of reformists and centrists exploit Lenin's 1905 fight against apparatus conservatism for anti-Leninist purposes, it is extremely important to define precisely the issues of that dispute. What aspect or aspects of *What Is To Be Done?* did Lenin consider no longer relevant in 1905?

Lenin did *not* change his position on the relationship between consciousness and spontaneity. In 1905 and until his death, he maintained that the revolutionary vanguard party was uniquely the conscious expression of the historic interests of the proletariat. As we have pointed out, the April 1905 Bolshevik congress, where Lenin fought for a mass recruitment campaign, condemned the Mensheviks for "a general tendency to belittle the significance of consciousness, which they subordinate to spontaneity, in the proletarian struggle." Lenin did not regard the "young fighters" and would-be recruits of 1905 as more politically advanced than the conservative Bolshevik committeemen. On the contrary, he insisted that the knowledgeable, hardened committeemen could and should raise the subjectively revolutionary "young fighters" to their own level.

Lenin did not water down the party's revolutionary program to attract more backward workers; he did not engage in demagoguery. This is obvious from the passage quoted in "New Forces and New Tasks." He also did not believe that broad recruitment required a downgrading in the responsibility and discipline of membership. The April Bolshevik congress replaced the loose 1903 Martovite definition of membership with Lenin's position on formal organizational participation. Nor did Lenin hold that the transformation of the Bolsheviks into a mass workers party should lead to a significant relaxation in organizational centralism. Throughout this period he reaffirmed his belief that centralism was a fundamental organizational principle of revolutionary social democracy. For example, in the article "The Jena Congress of the German Social-Democratic Workers' Party" (September 1905), he wrote:

"It is important that the highly characteristic feature of this revision [of the SPD rules] should be stressed, i.e., the tendency toward further, more comprehensive and stricter application of the principle of *centralism*, the establishment of a stronger organization...."

"On the whole, this obviously shows that the growth of the Social-Democratic movement and of its revolutionary spirit necessarily and inevitably leads to the consistent establishment of centralism."

### **Building on the Foundations of *What Is To Be Done?***

In what way then did Lenin regard *What Is To Be Done?* as inapplicable to the tasks facing the Bolsheviks in 1905? In 1905 Lenin advocated a lowering of the hitherto normal level of political experience and knowledge required for recruit-

ment and also for leadership responsibilities. And this change was not so much in Lenin's concept of the vanguard party as in the consciousness of the Russian proletariat. In the underground conditions of 1902-03, only a small number of advanced workers would adhere to the revolutionary social-democratic program, risking imprisonment and exile, and accept the discipline of the newly formed and faction-ridden RSDRP. After Bloody Sunday tens of thousands of militant young workers and also radical petty bourgeois wanted to become revolutionary social democrats, insofar as they understood what this meant. Broad recruitment in 1902-03 would have smothered the revolutionary elements of the RSDRP under a mass of backward, Russian Orthodox, liberal-tsarist workers. In 1905, the solid Bolshevik cadre organization was capable of assimilating large numbers of radicalized, though politically raw, workers.

Lenin's mass recruitment policy in 1905 was neither a repudiation nor a correction of the principles expressed in *What Is To Be Done?* but was based on their *successful implementation*. A necessary precondition for a broad recruitment campaign during a revolutionary crisis is a politically homogeneous cadre organization. And Lenin explicitly states this in a passage that Cliff himself quotes, but refuses to understand or is incapable of understanding:

"Danger may be said to lie in a sudden influx of large numbers of non-Social-Democrats into the Party. If that occurred, the Party would be dissolved among the masses, it would cease to be the conscious vanguard of the class, its role would be reduced to that of a tail. That would mean a very deplorable period indeed. And this danger *could* undoubtedly become a *very serious* one if we showed any inclination towards demagoguery, if we lacked party principles (program, tactical rules, organizational experience), or if those principles were feeble and shaky. But the fact is that no such 'ifs' exist.... [W]e have demanded class-consciousness from those joining the Party, we have insisted on the tremendous importance of continuity in the Party's development, we have preached discipline and demanded that *every* Party member be trained in one or another of the Party organizations. We have a firmly established Party program which is officially recognized by all Social-Democrats and the fundamental propositions of which have not given rise to any criticism.... We have resolutions on tactics which were consistently worked out at the Second and Third Congresses and in the course of many years' work of the Social-Democratic press. We also have some organizational experience and an actual organization, which has played an educational role and has undoubtedly borne fruit." [emphasis in original]

—"The Reorganization of the Party" (November 1905)

A weak propaganda group or small, heterogeneous party which opens its gates during a revolutionary upsurge will be swamped by immature, impressionistic, volatile elements who will lead that party to disaster. This is precisely what happened to the German Spartakusbund of Luxemburg and Liebknecht in 1918-19. Lenin's Bolsheviks in 1905 were able to avoid the tragic fate of the Spartakusbund because they had constructed an organization according to the principles of *What Is To Be Done?* for the previous five years.

Unlike the Bolsheviks, the Mensheviks were in a sense swamped by their mass of radicalized recruits. Under the impact of the deepening revolution, the Menshevik leadership in effect *split*. Martov's chief lieutenant, Theodore Dan, and Martynov (of all people) supported Trotsky's campaign for a "workers government." Martov and Plekhanov adhered to the official Menshevik position of abstaining from the struggle for governmental power. Thus the revolution of 1905 found the two most authoritative figures of Menshevism isolated on the right wing of their own tendency.



It is doubtful that Lenin believed the large majority of those recruited in 1905 would remain Bolsheviks over the long haul, particularly if the revolution failed (as it did) and a period of reaction set in. But among those first drawn to revolutionary struggle in 1905, it was difficult to distinguish the genuinely advanced elements from the politically backward or deviant, the serious-minded revolutionaries from those simply caught up in the excitement of the moment. Only time and internal struggle would sort out the future Bolsheviks recruited during the revolution from the accidental accretions. During the revolution of 1905 the real Bolshevik Party remained the committeemen of the *Iskra* period: the new recruits were in effect candidate members.

Under normal conditions a revolutionary organization selects, educates and trains its members in good part before they join. This preparatory process often occurs through a transitional organization (e.g., women's section, youth group, trade-union caucus). But during a revolutionary upsurge such a relatively lengthy pre-recruitment period may well deprive the vanguard party of some of the best young fighters who want to play a full political role through party participation. Given a sufficiently large and solid core cadre, the vanguard party should seek to recruit all the seemingly healthy elements who embrace the revolutionary Marxist program as best they understand it. The process of selection and education then takes place internally.

Mass recruitment during a revolution represents in extreme form a general characteristic of party growth and development. The transition from a propaganda circle to a mass workers party is not a uniform, linear process. Periods of rapid growth and expansion into new milieus are typically followed by a period of consolidation, marked by a certain inward turning, leading to the crystallization of a new layer of cadre.

In June 1907, Lenin brought out a collection of his major writings entitled *Twelve Years*. At this time the Bolsheviks were still a mass, legal organization with an estimated membership of 45,000. The victory of tsarist reaction had not yet reduced the Bolsheviks to a relatively small underground

network. The condition of the Bolsheviks in early 1907 and the situation they faced were thus very different from the *Iskraists* of 1902-03.

Lenin therefore had to explain and emphasize the historical context and immediate factional purpose of *What Is To Be Done?* In his preface to *Twelve Years*, Lenin observes that

"The Economists had gone to one extreme. *What Is To Be Done?*, I said, straightens out what had been twisted by the Economists....

"The meaning of these words is clear enough: *What Is To Be Done?* is a controversial correction of Economist distortions and it would be wrong to regard the pamphlet in any other light."

Every rightist revisionist (e.g., Tony Cliff, J.-J. Marie) has leapt upon these few sentences, as if they were a dispensation from heaven, in order to claim that Lenin regarded *What Is To Be Done?* as an exaggerated and historically obsolete political statement. This is a fundamental distortion of Lenin's meaning. *What Is To Be Done?* appeared one-sided in 1907 because it dealt with the crystallization of an agitational party composed of professional revolutionaries out of a loose movement of propaganda circles. The 1902 polemic did not deal with the transformation of such an agitational organization into a mass workers party, nor with the problems and tasks of a mass revolutionary party.

In the same preface to *Twelve Years*, Lenin asserts that building an organization of professional revolutionaries is a necessary stage in constructing a mass revolutionary proletarian party, of which they will be the vital hard core. He pointed out that the committeemen of the *Iskra* period formed the basis of all subsequent Bolshevik organizations:

"The question arises, who accomplished, who brought into being this superior unity, solidarity and stability of our Party. It was accomplished by the organization of professional revolutionaries, to the building of which *Iskra* made the greatest contribution. Anyone who knows our Party's history well, anyone who has had a hand in building the Party, has but to glance at the delegate list of any of the groups at, say, the [1907] London Congress, in order to be convinced of this and notice at once that it is a list of the old membership, the central core that had worked hardest of all to build up the Party and make it what it is."

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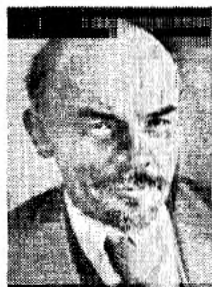
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# Party, Faction & "Freedom of Criticism"



The emergence of differences with the Mensheviks over the role of bourgeois liberalism in the revolution weakened, but did not eliminate, the forces of conciliationism in the Bolshevik camp. At the all-Bolshevik Third Congress of the RSDRP in April 1905, Lenin found himself in a minority on the question of how to deal with the Mensheviks. He wanted to expel the Mensheviks, who had boycotted the Congress, from the RSDRP. The majority of delegates were unwilling to take such an extreme step. The Congress adopted a motion that the Mensheviks should be permitted to remain in a unitary RSDRP on condition that they recognize the leadership of the Bolshevik majority and adhere to party discipline. Needless to say, the Mensheviks rejected such unity conditions out of hand.

While the beginning of the 1905 Revolution deepened the split between Bolshevism and Menshevism, its further development produced overpowering pressures for the reunification of Russian Social Democracy. A number of factors, all reinforcing one another, created a tremendous sentiment for unity among members of both tendencies. Common military struggle against the tsarist state produced a strong sense of solidarity among the advanced workers of Russia, the militants and supporters of the social-democratic movement.

By the summer of 1905, a large majority of both tendencies consisted of new, young recruits who had not experienced the struggle of Iskraism against the Economists or the 1903 Bolshevik-Menshevik split and its aftermath. Thus for the majority of Russian social-democratic workers, the organizational division was incomprehensible and appeared to be based on "ancient history." The general belief that the differences within Russian Social Democracy were not significant was reinforced by the political disarray among the Menshevik leaders. The most prominent Menshevik in 1905 was Trotsky, head of the St. Petersburg Soviet, who was to the left of Lenin on the goals and prospects of the revolution. Thus the political attitudes of many who joined the Bolshevik and Menshevik organizations in 1905 did not correspond to the programs of their respective leaderships. In his 1940 biography of Stalin, Trotsky noted that in 1905 the Menshevik rank and file stood closer to Lenin's position on the role of Social Democracy in the revolution than to Plekhanov's.

The sentiment for unity was so strong that several local Bolshevik committees simply fused with their Menshevik counterparts in spite of opposition from their leadership. In his memoirs written in the 1920s, the old Bolshevik Osip Piatnitsky describes the situation in the Odessa social-democratic movement in late 1905:

"It was obvious to the [Bolshevik leading] committee that the proposal of union would be passed by a great majority at the Party meetings of both the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, for wherever the advocates of immediate unity spoke they were supported almost unanimously. Therefore the Bolshevik committee was forced to work out the terms of union which they themselves were against. It was important to do that, for otherwise the union would have occurred without any conditions at all."

—*Memoirs of a Bolshevik* (1973)

In his 1923 history of the Bolsheviks, Gregory Zinoviev sums up the 1906 reunification thus:

"As a consequence of the revolutionary battles of late 1905 and under the influence of the masses, the staffs of the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were forced to re-unite. In effect the masses forced the Bolsheviks to reconcile themselves to the Mensheviks on several questions."

—*History of the Bolshevik Party—A Popular Outline* (1973)

Zinoviev's statement is perhaps oversimplified. It is unlikely that Lenin simply capitulated to pressure from below. The overwhelming sentiment for unity meant that the organizational divisions no longer corresponded to the political consciousness of the respective memberships. Some of the Bolsheviks' young recruits were actually closer to the left Mensheviks, and vice versa. A period of internal struggle was necessary to separate out the revolutionary elements who joined the social-democratic movement in 1905 from the opportunistic elements.

## Reunification

In the fall of 1905, the Bolshevik Central Committee and Menshevik Organizing Committee began unity negotiations. The Bolshevik Central Committee in Russia approved of fusions at the local level as the means of reunifying the RSDRP as a whole. Lenin, who was still in exile in Switzerland, strongly intervened to stop this organic unification from below. He insisted that the reunification take place at the top, at a new party congress, with delegates elected on a factional platform. In a letter (3 October 1905) to the Central Committee, he wrote:

"We should not confuse the policy of uniting the two parts with the *mixing-up* of both parts. We agree to uniting the two parts, but we shall never agree to mixing them up. We must demand of the committees a distinct division, then two congresses and amalgamation." [emphasis in original]

In December 1905, a United Center was formed consisting of an equal number of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. At the same time, the central organs of the rival tendencies, the Menshevik *Iskra* and Bolshevik *Proletary*, were discontinued and superseded by a single publication, *Partinyye Izvestiia* (*Party News*).

Significantly, the Mensheviks agreed to accept Lenin's 1903 definition of membership as requiring formal organizational participation. This was in part a concession to the Leninists, but mainly reflected the fact that in the relatively open conditions of 1905-06, formal organizational participation was not a bar to broad recruitment. The Mensheviks' turnabout completely disproves the widespread notion that Lenin's insistence that members must be subject to organizational discipline was a peculiarity of the underground. On the contrary, it was the Mensheviks who considered that illegality required a looser definition of membership so as to attract social-democratic workers and intellectuals unwilling to face the rigors and dangers of clandestinity.

The Fourth (or "Reunification") Congress, held in Stockholm in April 1906, was divided between 62 Mensheviks



and 46 Bolsheviks. Also represented were the Jewish Bund, the Lettish social democrats and the Polish social democrats led by Luxemburg and Jogiches. No one has contested that the factions' representation at the Fourth Congress corresponded to their respective strength at the base, among the social-democratic workers in Russia. (In early 1906, the Mensheviks had about 18,000 members, the Bolsheviks about 12,000.)

What accounted for the Menshevik majority among Russian social democrats in early 1906? First, the Bolshevik committeemen's conservative attitude toward recruitment in early 1905 also manifested itself in a sectarian attitude toward the new mass organizations thrown up by the revolution—the trade unions and, above all, the soviets. Thus the Mensheviks were able to get a head start in vying for the leadership of the broad working-class organizations. Although Trotsky was not a Menshevik factionalist, his role as head of the St. Petersburg Soviet strengthened the authority of the anti-Leninist wing of Russian Social Democracy. Secondly, the Mensheviks' advocacy of immediate, organic fusion enabled them to appeal to the young recruits' political naiveté and desire for unity.

With the defeat of the Bolshevik-led Moscow insurrection in December 1905, the tide turned in favor of tsarist reaction. While the Bolsheviks considered the tsarist victories a temporary setback during a continuing revolutionary situation, the Mensheviks concluded that the revolution was over. The Menshevik position corresponded to the increasingly defeatist mood of the masses in the early months of 1906.

Throughout the period of the Fourth Congress, Lenin several times affirmed his loyalty to a unitary RSDRP. For example, in a brief factional statement at the conclusion of the Congress, he wrote:

"We must and shall fight ideologically against those decisions of the Congress which we regard as erroneous. But at the same time we declare to the whole Party that we are opposed to a split of any kind. We stand for submission to the decisions of the Congress.... We are profoundly convinced that the workers' Social-Democratic organizations must be united, but in these united organizations there must be a wide and free criticism of Party questions, free comradely criticism and assessment of events in Party life."

—"An Appeal to the Party by Delegates to the Unity Congress Who Belonged to the Former 'Bolshevik' Group" (April 1906)

For Lenin, the reunification represented *both* a continuing adherence to the Kautskyan doctrine of "the party of the whole class" and a tactical maneuver to win over the mass of raw, young workers who had joined the social-democratic movement during the 1905 Revolution. We have no way of assessing the different weighting Lenin gave to these two very different considerations. Nor do we know how in 1906 Lenin envisaged the future course of Bolshevik-Menshevik relations.

It is unlikely that Lenin looked forward to or projected a definitive split and the creation of a Bolshevik party. Among other factors, Lenin knew that the Bolsheviks would not be recognized as the sole representative of Russian Social Democracy by the Second International. And when in 1912 the Bolsheviks did split completely from the Mensheviks and claimed to be *the* RSDRP, the leadership of the International did not recognize that claim.

Lenin probably would have liked to reduce the Mensheviks to an impotent minority subject to the discipline of a revolutionary (i.e., Bolshevik) leadership of the RSDRP.

This is how he viewed the relationship of the Bernsteinian revisionists to the Bebel/Kautsky leadership of the SPD. However, he knew that the Menshevik cadre were unwilling to act and perhaps incapable of acting as a disciplined minority in a revolutionary party. He further recognized that he did not have the authority of a Bebel to make an opportunist tendency submit to his organizational leadership.

In striving for leadership of the Russian workers movement, Lenin did not limit himself to winning over the Menshevik rank and file, to purely internal RSDRP factional struggle. He sought to recruit *non-party* workers and radical petty bourgeois *directly* to the Bolshevik tendency. To this end the Bolshevik "faction" of the RSDRP acted much like an independent party with its own press, leadership and disciplinary structure, finances, public activities and local committees. That in the 1906-12 period the Bolsheviks, while formally a faction in a unitary RSDRP, had most of the characteristics of an independent party was the later judgment of such diverse political figures as Trotsky, Zinoviev and the Menshevik leader Theodore Dan.

In the course of a 1940 polemic against the American Shachtman faction, Trotsky characterized the Bolsheviks in this period as a "faction" which "bore all the traits of a party" (*In Defense of Marxism* [1940]).

Zinoviev's *History of the Bolshevik Party* describes the situation following the Fourth Congress:

"The Bolsheviks had set up during the Congress their own internal and, for the party, *illegal*, Central Committee. This period of our party's history when we were in the minority on both the Central Committee and the St. Petersburg Committee and had to conceal our *separate revolutionary activity*, was very arduous and unpleasant for us.... It was a situation where two parties were seemingly operating within the structure of one." [our emphasis]

Theodore Dan's 1945 work, *The Origins of Bolshevism* (1970), presents a similar analysis of Bolshevik-Menshevik relations:

"It was not an organizational but a political divergence that very quickly split the Russian Social-Democracy into two factions, which sometimes drew close and then clashed with each other, but basically remained independent parties that kept fighting with each other even at a time when they were nominally within the framework of a unitary party."

## Democratic Centralism and "Freedom of Criticism"

From the Fourth Congress in April 1906 until the Fifth Congress in May 1907, the Bolsheviks were a minority faction in the RSDRP. In striving for the party leadership, the Bolsheviks did not primarily orient toward winning over a section of the Menshevik cadre. With a few individual exceptions, Lenin regarded the seasoned Menshevik cadre as hardened opportunists, at least in the immediate period. Paradoxically, the reunification demonstrated the hardness of the line separating the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks; few veterans of either group changed sides.

One of Lenin's motives in agreeing to unity was that the continuing split repelled many social-democratic workers from joining either group. Since recruiting non-party elements was key to struggle against the Menshevik leadership of the RSDRP, Lenin naturally wanted to be able to publicly attack that leadership. It was in that historic context that Lenin defined democratic centralism as "freedom of criticism, unity in action." In the 1906-07 period, Lenin on numerous occasions advocated the right of minorities to publicly oppose the positions, though not the actions, of the party leadership.

**Moscow, 1905:  
Barricades on the  
Arbat during  
Russian  
Revolution.**



Predictably, various rightist revisionists have “rediscovered” Lenin’s 1906 advocacy of “freedom of criticism”—the product of a continuing adherence to a classic social-democratic concept of the party and a tactical maneuver against the Mensheviks—and proclaimed it the true form of Leninist democratic centralism. Certain left-centrist groupings which broke out of the fake-Trotskyist United Secretariat in the early 1970s, made “freedom of criticism” a key part of their program. The most significant of these groups was the West German Internationale Kommunisten Deutschlands, of which but feeble remnants exist today. The Leninist Faction (LF) in the American Socialist Workers Party, which gave rise to the short-lived Class Struggle League (CSL), likewise championed “freedom of criticism.” A central leader of the LF/CSL, Barbara G., wrote a lengthy document entitled “Democratic Centralism” (August 1972) on the subject. The central conclusion is:

“Lenin felt that discussion of political differences in the party press was important because the party and press were those of the working class. If the workers were to see the party as *their* party, they must see party questions as *their* questions, party struggles as *their* struggles. The worker coming around the party must understand that he has the possibility of helping to build the party, not only through repeating the majority line, but through (under party guidelines) advancing his criticisms and ideas.” [emphasis in original]

Barbara G. quotes approvingly from Lenin’s May 1906 article, “Freedom to Criticize and Unity of Action”:

“Criticism within the limits of the *principles* of the Party Program must be quite free...not only at Party meetings, but also at public meetings. Such criticism, or such ‘agitation’ (for criticism is inseparable from agitation) cannot be prohibited.”

The “Party” that Lenin is referring to here is *not* the Bolshevik Party which led the October Revolution. It is the inclusive party of all Russian social democrats led by the Menshevik faction, i.e., by demonstrated opportunists. To equate the RSDRP of 1906 with a revolutionary vanguard is to obliterate the distinction between Bolshevism and Menshevism.

Short of an open split, Lenin did everything possible to prevent the RSDRP’s Menshevik leadership from hindering the Bolsheviks’ revolutionary agitation and actions. We have already quoted Zinoviev to the effect that the Bolsheviks established a formal leadership structure in violation of party

rules. They also had independent finances. By August 1906, the Bolsheviks had re-established a factional organ, *Proletary*, under the auspices of the St. Petersburg Committee where they had just won a majority.

That the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks could not coexist in a unitary party according to the formula “freedom of criticism, unity in action” was demonstrated by the St. Petersburg election campaign in early 1907. During this period the principal conflict between the groups focused on electoral support to the liberal monarchist Cadet Party. At a party conference in November 1906, the Menshevik majority adopted a compromise whereby the local committees determined their own electoral policy. In order to undermine the Bolshevik stronghold of St. Petersburg, the Central Committee then ordered that committee split in two. Correctly denouncing this as a purely factional maneuver, the Bolsheviks refused to split the committee. At a St. Petersburg conference to decide on electoral policy, the Mensheviks split, claiming the conference was illegitimate. They then supported the Cadets against the Bolshevik RSDRP campaign.

When Lenin denounced this act of class treason in a pamphlet, *The St. Petersburg Elections and the Hypocrisy of the Thirty-One Mensheviks*, the Central Committee brought him up on charges of making statements “impermissible for a Party member.” The Central Committee’s juridical actions against Lenin were postponed until the Fifth Congress, where they were rendered moot by the Bolsheviks’ gaining a majority.

The spirit in which Lenin advocated “freedom of criticism” can be seen in his “defense” against the Menshevik accusation that he “cast suspicion upon the political integrity of Party members”:

“By my sharp and discourteous attacks on the Mensheviks on the eve of the St. Petersburg elections, I actually succeeded in causing that section of the proletariat *which trusts and follows the Mensheviks* to waver. That was my aim. That was my duty as a member of the St. Petersburg Social-Democratic organization which was conducting a campaign for a Left bloc; because, *after the split, it was necessary*...to rout the Mensheviks who were leading the proletariat in the footsteps of the Cadets; *it was necessary* to carry confusion into their ranks; it was necessary to arouse among the masses hatred, aversion and contempt for those people who had *ceased* to be members



of a united party, had become political enemies.... Against *such* political enemies I then conducted—and in the event of a repetition or development of a split *shall always conduct*—a struggle of *extermination*." [emphasis in original]

—"Report to the Fifth Congress of the R.S.D.L.P. on the St. Petersburg Split..." (April 1907)

Lenin's advocacy of "freedom of criticism" in the Menshevik-led RSDRP of 1906 was analogous to the Trotskyists' position on democratic centralism when they did an entry into the social-democratic parties in the mid-1930s. The Trotskyists opposed democratic centralism for those parties in order to maximize their impact both among the social-democratic membership and outside the parties as well. Conversely, elements of the social-democratic leadership then came out for democratic-centralist norms in order to suppress the Trotskyists. Referring to the Trotskyists' experience in the American Socialist Party of Norman Thomas, James P. Cannon expresses very well the unique applicability of democratic centralism to the revolutionary vanguard:

"Democratic-centralism has no special virtue per se. It is the specific principle of a combat party, united by a single program, which aims to lead a revolution. Social Democrats have no need of such a system of organization for the simple reason that they have no intention of organizing a revolution. Their democracy and centralism are not united by a hyphen but kept in separate compartments for separate purposes. The democracy is for the social patriots and the centralism is for the revolutionists. The attempt of the Zam-Tyler 'Clarity-ite' faction in the Socialist Party in introducing a rigid 'democratic-centralist' system of organization in the heterogeneous Socialist Party (1936-37) was a howling caricature; more properly, an abortion. The only thing those people needed centralization and discipline for was to suppress the rights of the left wing and then to expel it."

—Letter to Duncan Conway (3 April 1953),  
in *Speeches to the Party* (1973)

Following the definitive split with the Mensheviks and the creation of the Bolshevik Party in 1912, Lenin abandoned his 1906 position on "freedom of criticism." In July 1914, the International Socialist Bureau arranged a conference to

reunite the Russian social democrats. Among Lenin's numerous conditions for unity is a clear rejection of "freedom of criticism":

"The existence of two rival newspapers in the same town or locality shall be absolutely forbidden. The minority shall have the right to discuss before *the whole Party*, disagreements on program, tactics and organization in a *discussion journal specially published for the purpose*, but shall not have the right to publish in a rival newspaper, pronouncements disruptive of the actions and decisions of the majority." [our emphasis]

—"Report to the C.C. of the R.S.D.L.P. to the Brussels Conference" (June 1914)

Lenin further stipulated that public agitation against the underground party or for "cultural-national autonomy" was absolutely forbidden.

Barbara G., in her paper on "Democratic Centralism," recognizes that by 1914 Lenin had changed his position:

"By 1914, then, Lenin had definitely changed his thinking on the following question: Where he used to think it permissible to have faction newspapers within the RSDLP, he now thought it impermissible because it confused and divided the working class."

Barbara G. *minimizes* Lenin's rejection of "freedom of criticism." He not only rejected rival public factional organs, but the *right* of minorities to *publicly* criticize the majority position in any form. He further specified that on two key differences—the underground and "cultural-national autonomy"—the minority position could not be advocated publicly at all. It is characteristic of centrists, like Barbara G., to prefer the Lenin of 1906, who accepted unity with the Mensheviks and still adhered to classic social-democratic concepts of the party, to the Lenin of 1914, who had definitively broken with the Mensheviks and thereby challenged the Kautskyan doctrine that revolutionaries and labor reformists should coexist in a unitary party.

The membership and particularly the leading cadre of a revolutionary vanguard have a *qualitatively* higher level of political class consciousness than *all* non-party elements. A revolutionary leadership can make errors, even serious ones, on

issues where the masses of workers are correct. Such occurrences will be very rare. If they are not rare, then it is the revolutionary character of the organization which is called into question, not the norms of democratic centralism.

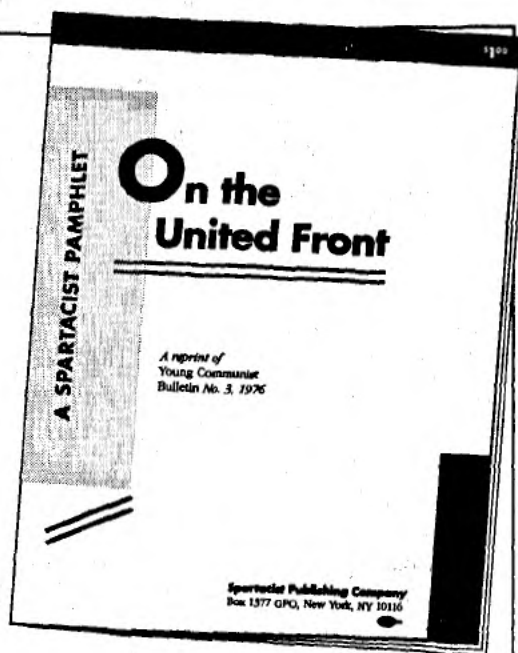
A minority within a revolutionary organization seeks to win over its leading cadre, not to appeal to more backward elements against that cadre. The resolution of differences within the vanguard should be as free as possible from the intervention of backward elements, a prime source of bourgeois ideological pressure. "Freedom of criticism" maximizes the influence of backward workers, not to speak of conscious political enemies, on the revolutionary vanguard. Thus "freedom of criticism" does grave damage to the internal cohesion and external authority of the proletarian vanguard.

## On the United Front

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# In Defense of Democratic Centralism



*We publish below excerpts from a speech by comrade James Robertson of the Spartacist League/U.S. Central Committee to a national conference of the West German Spartacus (Bolschewiki-Leninisten) in February 1973. Spartacus-BL subsequently underwent organizational hemorrhaging through a series of clique splits among its central leadership. The remnants fused in early 1974 with the equally debilitated Internationale Kommunisten Deutschlands (IKD), from which Spartacus-BL had split in December 1972, to form the Spartakusbund (SpB). Continuing in the same vein of trying to form an eclectic amalgam of Trotskyism and Menshevism, the centrist Spartakusbund was unable to politically answer authentically Leninist oppositionists and, racked by recurrent cliquish infighting, resorted to repeated bureaucratic expulsions which left the fused organization a fraction of its original size. The original core of our German section (now the Spartakist Workers Party [SpAD]) was constituted by fusions and recruitment of left oppositionists from both wings of the original IKD. The full text of the speech is available in the German edition of Spartacist, No. 1 (Spring 1974).*

We see two parallel problems internationally among those who profess to be Trotskyist. One is not yours. That is the formal Bolshevism with all of the formal lessons properly assimilated, represented by such formations as the Spanish POUM, the French OCI, the Bolivian POR. The problem, and it is not a definitively closed question, is that while these comrades have mastered quite fully in a way that you have not the forms of a Bolshevik organization, they have minimized the content. They do not see the united front and all of its related phenomena—that is, entristment into other reformist workers formations, regroupment processes and the like—as the way in which, to quote Trotsky, “the proletarian base should be set against the bourgeois top.” Rather, they came to separate the united front from the party, expecting, for example in France, that the Socialist and Communist parties would somehow, by coming together organizationally, achieve revolutionary proletarian pacts. They cancel out the role of the Bolsheviks.

We see a somewhat different problem with your organization in particular, and that is a tendency to go back in form and political outlook to the Russian Social Democracy as it was around about 1903. To the extent that some of you do this in ignorance, it can be overcome through struggle. But those of you who deliberately ignore the expe-

rience of the October Revolution, the founding of the Communist International and all that came after—the first four congresses of the Comintern, the struggle of the Trotskyist Left Opposition—those of you who would turn your backs on this are already, in the egg, opportunist little Kautskys.

Any variant of the Kautskyst conception of the “party of the whole class” is a willfully non-revolutionary and ultimately counterrevolutionary position. The latest and fullest representative of this species of revisionists is Max Shachtman. The last major article that he ever wrote was entitled “American Communism: A Reexamination of the Past.” He finds the original sin of communism in the splits to the left from the Social Democracy that took place during and after World War I, creating a division in the political expression of the proletariat. He finds the cause of these splits in a change in the understanding of the role of reformism, of opportunism, on the part of revolutionary socialists within the working-class movement.

Shachtman quotes Lenin very favorably through the “period of about 1908. In particular, he observes that if the revolutionaries had only followed the rule of “freedom of criticism, unity in action,” the unity of the proletarian party could have been preserved. He argues that at that time Lenin had an understanding of opportunism as a transient, ephemeral, secondary aspect of the workers movement. In particular, he praises Lenin for advocating that in those local areas where the Bolsheviks were in the minority they should subordinate themselves to the Mensheviks and vote for the Cadet [Constitutional Democrats] party. (Where the Bolsheviks had the majority, Lenin held, they should either vote for social-democratic candidates or, if given no other choice, abstain.) Shachtman, because he had become a social democrat, does not go into the reason for the evolution in the views of the Bolshevik faction. He merely describes the change in the Leninist position as a kind of original sin.

What we are dealing with in the period from the founding of *Iskra* to the founding of the Bolshevik Party in 1912 is the transformation of the Bolshevik faction from a revolutionary social-democratic into an embryonic communist organization. The model for the Russian revolutionary social democrats in the early period was the German Social Democracy. In the determination of the Bolshevik wing to pursue a revolution against tsarism, their political practice ran ahead of their theoretical model. And, of course, their organizational practice lagged even further behind and was highly empirical under the clandestine conditions.

It was possible for Lenin during the period of the reunification of the Russian Social Democracy, 1905-1907, to draw conclusions about the discipline of a party of reformists and revolutionaries which would be rejected out of hand by any Leninist today. That does not make us smarter than Marx or Lenin, it merely means that we are able to face current political questions in the light of their experience. The truth is historically conditioned; that is, the outlook of the Communist movement of the first four congresses of the Communist International rested upon a historic and successful upheaval of the revolutionary proletariat.

A comparable theoretical breakthrough and generalization accompanied this massive revolutionary achievement.



It is as though the theoretical outlook of the proletarian vanguard in the period 1919-23 in the International stood atop a mountain. But since that time, from the period of the Trotskyist Left Opposition until his death and afterward, the proletariat has mainly witnessed defeats and the revolutionary vanguard has either been shrunk or its continuity in many countries broken. One cannot separate the ability to know the world from the ability to change it, and our capacity to change the world is on a very small scale compared to the heroic days of the Communist International.

One of the great achievements of the Bolsheviks was to recognize that a political split in the working class is the precondition for proletarian revolution. The Bolsheviks had achieved this by 4 August 1914, but they had not generalized it either theoretically or internationally. The German revolutionary left of the time paid with the loss of its leaders, Luxemburg and Liebknecht, and a lost revolution for its failure to have assimilated this lesson.

### Workerism and "Freedom of Criticism"

We presented to you, comrades, in our written greetings to your conference, a certain definition of our understanding of the Leninist form of organization: "We state that the fundamental principle for communists is that one struggles among one's comrades to gain a majority for one's program, and that anyone who seeks to mobilize backward forces and alien class elements from outside a revolutionary Marxist organization in order to struggle for ascendancy inside that organization is no communist." To depart from this conception would immediately lead to the organization of the backward sections of the class against the party, especially its majority. I'm speaking in connection with the slogan "freedom of criticism, unity of action" employed in the united Menshevik-Bolshevik party of 1906. In the long run it necessarily leads to dissolving the party back into the class as a whole.

In the United States, I am acquainted with a particular species of workerism, the semi-syndicalists such as the Ellens group (related to Lutte Ouvrière) and the Leninist Faction (LF) majority, who have a conception that the working class in its natural condition has a pure proletarian essence. Now there's a very good book called *The Making of the British Working Class* by E.P. Thompson, and in the opening paragraphs he makes the observation that the working class cannot be described as a class detached from capitalist society. It can only be seen in the context, not only of the economics, but of the social relations of society as a whole. There are backward sections of the working class. The workers who support the Social Democracy in most countries are relatively advanced, as is the case with the workers who support the Stalinist parties where they are mass parties.

In a working class such as that in the United States, large sections of the workers are very backward indeed. But they are backward from the standpoint of the historic interests represented by the proletarian vanguard. They are forward in terms of bourgeois ideas. Religion, alcoholism, male chauvinism and the most virulent forms of racism are predominant manifestations in the absence of class struggle and without the presence of a proletarian vanguard. The

workerists refuse to see all this and instead see a pure, uncontaminated, isolated proletariat. At the same time they see the vanguard party as a mixture of radical workers and radical intellectuals who may not be so declassed.

The principal party internationally of the International Socialists (IS), the British organization of Tony Cliff, has lately become workerist. The IS, as a collection of the world's most perfect centrists, avidly follow political fads. Until a few years ago they were very pro-Labour Party and called their newspaper the *Labour Worker*. Today they are very much opposed to the British Labour Party, denying that it has any working-class character, and now call their paper the *Socialist Worker*. This by way of a preliminary to a current view of Tony Cliff.

Wanting to unite with the soul of the workers (as against the ugly Labour Party, which he once worshipped), he has written an essay called "Trotsky on Substitutionism" [in the IS pamphlet *Party and Class*], from which I'd like to read you a quote:

"Since the revolutionary party cannot have interests apart from the class, all the party's issues of policy are those of the class and they should therefore be thrashed out in the open in its presence. The freedom of discussion which exists in a factory meeting, which aims at unity of action after decisions are taken, should apply to the revolutionary party. This means that all discussions on basic issues of policy should be discussed in the light of day, in the open press. Let the mass of the workers take part in the discussion. Put pressure on the party, its apparatus, its leadership."

It's a little awkward to know what to say about that. The idea that the whole class, in all its sectional, racial, national backwardness, is to be the jury to decide questions of revolutionary strategy is appalling. In a trade union, which is a kind of economic united front, or in a political united front it is of course necessary for all of the participants who act to offer freely their criticism. But the idea that workers who follow priests, workers who are Stalinists, workers who belong to social-democratic parties should put pressure on in order to determine the policy of the revolutionary Marxists is an idea that will maintain the power of the bourgeoisie until a thermonuclear bomb eliminates the question.

### "Exceptions" to Democratic Centralism

In our greetings to your conference, we spoke of certain exceptional circumstances in connection with the application of democratic centralism among revolutionaries. Among the exceptional circumstances are when the party form does not centrally correspond with the revolutionary Marxist program. In the period at the end of and just after World War I, several large parties of the Socialist International broke apart, with big sections, often majorities, going over to the Third International. France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Italy and the United States come to mind. We also grabbed the left wing of the Polish PPS. In the period of this transition, there was just such a separation of party and program.

Another comparable circumstance would be where the revolutionists have entered in a reformist or centrist political formation. There, too, we would struggle for the maximum freedom of public discussion and the minimum

But the list of exceptional circumstances has not been exhausted. There was the projected split of Shachtman and Burnham from the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in 1940. It cut the SWP in half on the eve of World War II. Many of the youth that followed Shachtman and Burnham believed that they were involved in no revisionism, but were only going to build a bigger, better, faster revolutionary party. Trotsky and Cannon, in an effort to secure a little time in the framework of formal unification, made very substantial concessions in an attempt to retain the minority. There was, of course, no stopping of the minority, but Trotsky's majority made it very clear that these were episodic, special concessions in an attempt to give some of those in the minority a chance under easy organizational conditions to reconsider. Just as you might have wanted to make special concessions to the IKD when they walked out as a large minority. But

In times of great revolutionary turmoil the mass of the working class may run ahead of a somewhat sluggish revolutionary party. Lenin faced this situation a couple of times between the February and the October revolutions. When he was faced with conservative obstruction on the Central Committee, he threatened to take his case to the workers. This was not freedom of criticism within the party: it meant *split* and the creation of a second party, and Lenin knew it. To split is no crime, providing that there is sufficient political clarity and necessity to make a split. It is part of the living political process.

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# The Struggle Against the Boycotters



The Fifth Congress of the RSDRP, held in London in May 1907, was almost evenly divided between the Bolsheviks with 89 delegate votes and the Mensheviks with 88. At the Fourth Congress a year earlier three associated parties—the Jewish Bund, Latvian Social Democrats and Luxemburg/Jogiches' Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL)—had been incorporated into the RSDRP on a semi-federated basis. At the Fifth Congress the Bund had 54 delegate votes, the Latvian Social Democrats 26 and the SDKPiL 45.

In the course of a year's sharp factional struggle against the Mensheviks' liberal tailism and pro-Constitutional Democrat (Cadet) policy, the Bolsheviks had overcome their minority position within the Russian social-democratic movement. However, now the factional leadership of the RSDRP depended upon the three "national" social-democratic parties. The Bund consistently supported the Mensheviks. The Lettish Social Democrats generally supported the Bolsheviks, but sometimes mediated between the two hostile Russian groups. It was through the support of Rosa Luxemburg's SDKPiL that Lenin attained a majority at the Fifth Congress and in the leading bodies of the RSDRP for the next five years. The Lenin-Luxemburg bloc of 1906-11 is significant not only in its actual historic effect, but also because it reveals the relationship between *evolving* Leninism and this most consistent and important representative of pre-1914 revolutionary social democracy.

The decisive issue at the Fifth Congress was the attitude toward bourgeois liberalism, and specifically electoral support to the Cadet Party. With the support of the Letts and Poles (and also the left-wing Trotsky/Parvus group among the Mensheviks), the Bolshevik line carried; the Congress condemned the Cadets:

"The parties of the liberal-monarchist bourgeoisie, headed by the Constitutional Democratic Party [Cadets], have now definitely turned aside from the revolution and endeavor to halt it through a deal with the counterrevolution."

—Robert H. McNeal, ed., *Decisions and Resolutions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (1974)

Another resolution instructed the RSDRP Duma fraction to oppose "the treacherous policy of bourgeois liberalism which, under the slogan 'Safeguard the Duma,' in fact sacrifices the popular interests to the Black Hundreds" (*ibid.*). A few months after the Congress, a party conference decided to run independent RSDRP candidates in the upcoming Duma elections and to support no other parties.

While the Lettish and Polish Social Democrats supported the general Bolshevik line at the Fifth Congress, they also

moderated Lenin's fight against the Mensheviks. They voted against Lenin's motion to condemn the Menshevik majority of the outgoing Central Committee. The defection of the Latvian Social Democrats and the SDKPiL also accounted for Lenin's only serious defeat at the 1907 RSDRP congress. The congress voted overwhelmingly to oppose the Bolsheviks' "fighting operations" for "seizing funds" of the tsarist government.

During this period the Mensheviks' attack on the Leninists centered on these armed expropriations. Their near-hysterical reaction to the Bolsheviks' expropriations flowed from its shocking impact on bourgeois liberal respectability. Also the expropriations gave the Bolsheviks a financial superiority over the Mensheviks. In condemning the Bolsheviks' expropriation of government funds, the Mensheviks were convinced that they had unimpeachable social-democratic orthodoxy on their side.

The Bolsheviks, however, did not face the normal situation in which such robbery would immediately trigger the repressive apparatus of an overwhelmingly powerful and centralized state. Neither did they risk the condemnation of workers who might think they were mere criminals in political garb. Nor did the Bolsheviks maintain these expropriations as a "strategy" to be carried out over an extended period with the likely result of degeneration into lumpen criminal activity.

Lenin believed that there was a continuing revolutionary situation, in which the mass of workers and peasants were actively hostile to tsarist legality. The Bolsheviks' expropriations were concentrated in the Caucasus, where armed peasant and nationalist bands regularly challenged tsarist authorities. Lenin regarded the expropriations as one of several guerrilla tactics in the course of a revolutionary civil war. The Bolshevik-Menshevik dispute over armed expropriations was thus inextricably bound up with their fundamental difference over the political and military vanguard role of the proletarian party in the revolution to overthrow the autocracy.

Lenin's position on armed expropriations was presented in a resolution for the Fourth Congress held in April 1906. He continued to uphold this position through 1907:

"Whereas:

(1) scarcely anywhere in Russia since the December uprising has there been a complete cessation of hostilities, which the revolutionary people are now conducting in the form of sporadic guerrilla attacks upon the enemy.... We are of the opinion, and propose that the Congress should agree....

(4) that fighting operations are also permissible for the purpose of seizing funds belonging to the enemy, i.e., the autocratic government, to meet the needs of insurrection, particular care being taken that the interests of the people are infringed as little as possible."

—"A Tactical Platform for the Unity Congress of the R.S.D.L.P." (March 1906)

## Tsarist Reaction and the Ultraleft Bolsheviks

Shortly after the Fifth RSDRP Congress, in June 1907 the reactionary tsarist minister Stolypin executed a coup against the Duma. The Duma was dissolved and a new (Third) Duma proclaimed on the basis of a far less democratic electoral system. In addition, the social-democratic deputies were arrested and charged with fomenting mutiny in the armed forces.

Stolypin's coup marked the definitive end of the 1905 revolutionary period. The victory of tsarist reaction opened up

a new, and in one sense final, phase in the Bolshevik-Menshevik conflict, over the need to re-establish the underground as the party's basic organizational structure. The onset of reaction also produced a very sharp division within the Bolshevik camp between Leninism and ultraleftism, a factional struggle which had to be resolved before the historically far more significant conflict with Menshevism could be fought to a finish.

The conflict between Lenin and the ultraleft Bolsheviks centered on participation in the reactionary tsarist parliamentary body. Behind this difference lay Lenin's recognition that a reactionary period had set in, requiring a tactical retrenchment by the revolutionary party. The first battle occurred at a July 1907 RSDRP conference to determine policy for the upcoming Duma elections. Lenin still believed that Russia was passing through a general revolutionary period but regarded boycotting the elections as tactically unjustifiable:

"Whereas,

(1) active boycott, as the experience of the Russian revolution has shown, is correct tactics on the part of the Social-Democrats only under conditions of a sweeping, universal, and rapid upswing of the revolution, developing into an armed uprising, and only in connection with the ideological aims of the struggle against constitutional illusions arising from the convocation of the first representative assembly by the old regime;

(2) in the absence of these conditions correct tactics on the part of the revolutionary Social-Democrats calls for participation in the elections, as was the case with the Second Duma, even if all the conditions of a revolutionary period are present."

—"Draft Resolution on Participation in the Elections to the Third Duma" (July 1907)

In presenting this resolution Lenin found himself a minority of one among the nine Bolshevik delegates to the conference. The resolution passed with the votes of the Mensheviks, Bundists and Lettish and Polish Social Democrats; all the Bolsheviks except Lenin voted against.

The Bolshevik boycotters were, to be sure, greatly over-represented at this particular party gathering. Lenin had significant support for his position among the Bolshevik cadre and ranks and was quickly able to gain more. However, the ultraleft faction of 1907-09 was the most significant challenge to Lenin's leadership of the Bolshevik organization that he ever faced. The ultraleft leaders—Bogdanov (who had been Lenin's chief lieutenant), Lunacharsky, Lyadov, Alexinsky, Krasin—were very prominent Bolsheviks. As likely as not, a majority of the Bolshevik ranks supported boycotting the tsarist Duma in this period. Only Lenin's great personal authority prevented the development of an ultraleft faction strong enough to oust him and his supporters from the official Bolshevik center or to engineer a major split.

Lenin was aided in this faction struggle by the heterogeneity of the ultraleft tendency. A not very important tactical question divided the ultraleft Bolsheviks into two distinct groupings, the Otzovists ("Recallists") and the Ultimacists. The Otzovists demanded the immediate, unconditional recall of the RSDRP Duma fraction. The Ultimacists demanded that the Duma fraction be presented with an ultimatum to make inflammatory speeches, which would provoke the tsarist authorities into expelling them from the Duma or worse. In practice, both policies would have had the same effect, and Lenin denied that there was a significant division among his ultraleft opponents.

Lenin's position on the ultraleft faction was presented in resolution form at a June 1909 conference of the expanded editorial board meeting of *Proletary*, a de facto plenum of



Y.A. Zhelyabuzhsky

Lenin playing chess with Bogdanov (right) in Capri.

the Bolshevik central leadership. At this conference, Bogdanov was expelled from the Bolshevik organization. The key passages of the resolution state:

"The direct revolutionary struggle of the broad masses was then followed by a severe period of counter-revolution. It became essential for Social-Democrats to adapt their revolutionary tactics to this new situation, and, in connection with this, one of the most exceptionally important tasks became the use of the Duma as an open platform for the purpose of assisting Social-Democratic agitation.

"In this rapid turn of events, however, a section of the workers who had participated in the direct revolutionary struggle was unable to proceed at once to apply revolutionary Social-Democratic tactics in the new conditions of the counter-revolution, and continued simply to repeat slogans which *had been* revolutionary in the period of open civil war, but which now, if merely repeated, might retard the process of closing the ranks of the proletariat in the new conditions of struggle." [emphasis in original]

—"On Otzovism and Ultimatism"

Bogdanov's answer to Lenin is summarized in his 1910 "Letter to All Comrades," a founding document of his own independent group:

"Some people among your representatives in the executive collegium—the Bolshevik Center—who live abroad, have come to the conclusion that we must radically change our previous Bolshevik evaluation of the present historical moment and hold a course not toward a new revolutionary wave, but toward a long period of peaceful, constitutional development. This brings them close to the right wing of our party, the menshevik comrades who always, independently of any evaluation of the political situation, pull toward legal and constitutional forms of activity, toward 'organic work' and 'organic development'."

—Robert V. Daniels, ed., *A Documentary History of Communism* (1960)

Bogdanov's phrase about "a long period of peaceful, constitutional development" is ambiguous, perhaps deliberately so. As against many Mensheviks, Lenin did not regard a new revolution as off the agenda for an entire historical epoch, i.e., for several decades. By 1908, he concluded that before another revolutionary upsurge (like that of 1905) there would be a lengthy period in terms of the *working perspectives* of the



party and relative to the *past experience and expectations* of the Bolsheviks. 1908 was not 1903. And this reality was precisely what the Otvovists/Ultimatists denied.

## Philosophy and Politics

Otvovism/Ultimatism was associated with neo-Kantian idealistic dualism represented by the Austrian physicist-philosopher Ernst Mach, a philosophical doctrine then much in vogue in Central European intellectual circles. Bogdanov's *Empirionism* (1905-06) was an ambitious attempt to reconcile Marxism with neo-Kantianism. In 1908 Bogdanov's factional partner Lunacharsky deepened this idealism into outright spiritualism, positing the need for a socialist religion. Lunacharsky's "god-building" was, needless to say, a great embarrassment for the Bolsheviks as a whole, and even for the Otvovist/Ultimatist faction.

Bogdanov's sympathy for neo-Kantian philosophical doctrine was both well known and longstanding. As long as Bogdanov functioned as Lenin's lieutenant, and did not in himself represent a distinct political tendency, his neo-Kantianism was considered a personal peculiarity among both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks alike. But once Bogdanov became the leader of a distinct and for a time significant tendency in Russian Social Democracy, his philosophical views became a focus of general political controversy. Plekhanov, in particular, exploited Bogdanovism to attack the Bolshevik program as the product of flagrant subjective idealism. Lenin thus spent much of 1908 researching a major polemic against Bogdanov's neo-Kantianism, *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, in order to purge Bolshevism of the taint of philosophical idealism.

Lenin's close political collaboration with Bogdanov, despite the latter's neo-Kantianism on the one hand, and his massive polemic against Bogdanov's philosophical views on the other, have been used to justify symmetric deviations on this question by ostensible revolutionary Marxists. That the neo-Kantian Bogdanov was an important Bolshevik leader is sometimes cited to argue for an attitude of *indifference* toward dialectical materialism, a belief that the most general or abstract expression of the Marxian world view has no bearing on practical politics and associated organizational affiliation. When he broke with Trotskyism in 1940, the American revisionist Max Shachtman justified a bloc with the anti-dialectician and empiricist James Burnham by citing the "precedent" of Lenin and Bogdanov.

At the other pole, Lenin's major polemic against an opponent's idealistic deviation from Marxism has encouraged a tendency to "deepen" every factional struggle by bringing in philosophical questions—by *reducing* all political differences to *the* question of dialectical materialism. This mixture of pomposity and rational idealism has become a hallmark of the British Healyite group. (The Healy/Banda group has become so outright bizarre that it can no longer be taken seriously, least of all in its philosophical mystifications.)

The Healyites justified their 1972 split from their erstwhile bloc partners, the French neo-Kautskyan Organisation Communiste Internationaliste (OCI), by positing the primacy of "philosophy." They appealed to Lenin's 1908 polemic against Bogdanov as orthodox precedent:

"Lenin tirelessly studied the ideas of the new idealists, the neo-Kantians, in philosophy, even during the hardest practical struggle to establish the revolutionary party in Russia. When these ideas, in the form of 'empirio-criticism,' were taken up by a section of the Bolsheviks themselves, Lenin made a spe-

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Lunacharsky

cialized study and wrote against them a full-length work, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.

"Lenin understood very well that the years of extreme hardship and isolation after the defeat of the 1905 Revolution exposed the revolutionary movement to the greatest pressure of the class enemy. He knew that the *most fundamental task* of all was the defence and development of Marxist theory at the most basic level, that of *philosophy*. [our emphasis]

— International Committee, *In Defence of Trotskyism* (1973)

This passage is a complete falsification at several levels. To begin with, Lenin's historically more important political struggle in the period of reaction was *not* against Bogdanov's ultraleft Bolsheviks, but against the Menshevik Liquidators. In this latter struggle, philosophical questions played no particular role.

The Healyites also falsify Lenin's relationship with Bogdanov. When Bogdanov became part of the Bolshevik leadership in 1904, he was *already* a well-known neo-Kantian (Machian). Lenin and Bogdanov agreed that the Bolshevik tendency as such would take *no* position on the controversial philosophical issues. Lenin explains this in a letter to Maxim Gorky (25 February 1908) wherein he endorses his past relationship with Bogdanov, despite the latter's philosophical deviation:

"In the summer and autumn of 1904, Bogdanov and I reached a complete agreement, as *Bolsheviks*, and formed the tacit bloc, which tacitly ruled out philosophy as a neutral field, that existed all through the revolution and enabled us in that revolution to carry out together the tactics of revolutionary Social-Democracy (Bolshevism), which, I am profoundly convinced, were the only correct tactics." [emphasis in original]

It was the right-wing Menshevik Plekhanov who brought the question of dialectical materialism versus neo-Kantianism to the forefront in order to discredit and split the revolutionary Bolshevik leadership. In defending the Bolsheviks against Plekhanov, Lenin went so far as to deny that the issue of neo-Kantian revisionism was at all relevant to the revolutionary movement in Russia. At the all-Bolshevik Congress in April 1905, Lenin stated:

"Plekhanov drags in Mach and Avenarius by the ears. I cannot for the life of me understand what these writers, for whom I have not the slightest sympathy, have to do with the question of social revolution. They wrote on individual and social organization of experience, or some such theme, but they never really gave any thought to the democratic dictatorship."

— "Report on the Question of Participation of the Social-Democrats in a Provisional Revolutionary Government" (April 1905)

In part as a result of his later fight with Bogdanov, Lenin modified his 1905 position, which drew too arbitrary a line between political and philosophical differences. He came to realize that fundamental differences among Marxists over dialectical materialism will likely produce political divergences. However, for Lenin program remained primary in defining revolutionary politics and associated organizational affiliation. Lenin never repudiated his close collaboration with Bogdanov in 1904-07. And he was absolutely right to ally with the revolutionary social democrat, albeit neo-Kantian, Bogdanov against the pro-liberal social democrat, albeit dialectical materialist, Plekhanov. Only when Bogdanov's neo-Kantian conceptions became associated with a counterposed, anti-Marxist political program did Lenin make the defense of dialectical materialism against philosophical idealism a central political task.

## Against the Mystification of Dialectics

The Marxist program as the *scientific* expression of the interests of the working class and of social progress is not derived simply from a subjective desire for a socialist future. The Marxist program necessarily embodies a correct understanding of reality, of which the most general or abstract expression is dialectical materialism. However, as Marx himself wrote in 1877 to the Russian populist journal, *Otechestvenniye Zapiski*, he does *not* offer "a general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being supra-historical" (Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence* [1975]). Dialectical materialism is a *conceptual framework* which permits, but does *not* guarantee, a scientific understanding of society in its concrete historical development. In other words, an understanding of the dialectical nature of social reality guides a complex of historical generalizations (e.g., that the state apparatus under capitalism cannot be reformed into an organ of socialist administration, that in this epoch a collectivist economic system represents the social dominance of the proletariat) which underlies the Marxist programmatic principles.

The Healyite mystification of the Marxist attitude toward philosophy is a product of their degeneration into a bizarre leader-cult. In the early 1960s Healy's Socialist Labour League understood that dialectical materialism was nothing other than a generalized expression of a unitary worldview, and not an abstract schema or method existing independently of empirical reality. Cliff Slaughter's 1962-63 articles on Lenin's 1914-15 studies of Hegel, reprinted in 1971 as a pamphlet, *Lenin on Dialectics*, contain a trenchant attack upon the idealization of dialectics:

"Lenin lays great stress on Hegel's insistence that Dialectics is not a master-key, a sort of set of magic numbers by which all secrets will be revealed. It is wrong to think of dialectical logic as something that is complete in itself and then 'applied' to particular examples. It is not a model of interpretation to be learned, then fitted on to reality from the outside; the task is rather to uncover the law of development of the reality itself.... 'The science of society founded by Marx has no room for philosophy as such, for the idea of independently moving thought, with a subject-matter and development of its own, independent of reality but sometimes descending to impinge upon it.'"

Slaughter then quotes Marx's judgment on a concept of philosophy in *The German Ideology*: "When reality is depicted, philosophy as an independent branch of activity loses its medium of existence."

But by the late 1960s the Healyites had "rediscovered" a medium of existence for philosophy as an independent

theory. Dialectical materialism was presented with much fanfare as "the theory of knowledge of Marxism," as an expression of the philosophical category known as epistemology. Thus in a collection of documents on the split with the OCI (*Break With Centrist!* [1973]), we read:

"What was most essential in the preparation of the sections was to develop dialectical materialism in a struggle to understand and to transform the consciousness of the working class in the changing objective conditions. This means the understanding and development of dialectical materialism as the theory of knowledge of Marxism...."

"We are certainly saying that dialectical materialism is the theory of knowledge of Marxism, of the path of struggle from error to truth—not to a 'final' truth, but continually making advances through contradictory struggle to real knowledge of the objective world."

This Healyite notion of dialectical materialism is both enormously restrictive and is an idealization of knowledge. There is no valid, separate theory of knowledge. At the level of individual cognition, a theory of knowledge is derived from biological and psychological scientific investigation. At the level of social consciousness, a theory of knowledge is a constituent part of an understanding of historically specific social relations. Thus, central to the Marxist understanding of knowledge is the concept of false consciousness, the *necessary* distortion of reality associated with various social roles.

The traditional philosophical category of epistemology (in both its empiricist and rationalist forms), by separating the conscious subject from nature and society, is itself an ideological expression of false consciousness. Dialectical materialism criticizes the various traditional concepts of epistemology as well as other philosophical concepts and categories. But Marxism does not criticize traditional philosophy by positing itself as a new, alternative philosophy, which likewise exists independently of a scientific (i.e., empirically verifiable) understanding of nature and society.

The Healyite mystification of dialectical materialism—"the path of struggle from error to truth"—is primarily a justification for the infallibility of a leader-cult. The program, analyses, tactics and projections of the Healyite leadership are thus held to be exempt from empirical verification. For example, to this day the Healyites claim that Cuba is capitalist! Critics and oppositionists are told that they don't understand reality; this capacity being monopolized by the leadership, which alone has mastered the dialectical method. The similarity between the Healyite view of dialectics and religious mysticism is not coincidental.

To summarize, the systematic rejection of dialectical materialism (e.g., Bogdanov, Burnham) must lead sooner or later to a break with the scientific Marxist program. But to believe à la Healy that every serious political difference within a revolutionary party can or should be reduced to antagonistic philosophical concepts is a species of rational idealism. Such philosophical reductionism denies that political differences commonly arise from the diverse social pressures and influences that bear down upon the revolutionary vanguard and its component parts, and also differences in evaluating empirical conditions and possibilities.

## Significance of the Struggle Against Otzovism/Ultimatism

The end of the factional struggle between the Leninists and Otzovists/Ultimatists occurred at the previously mentioned June 1909 conference of the expanded editorial board



of *Proletary*. The conference resolved that Bolshevism "has nothing in common with otzovism and ultimatism, and that the Bolshevik wing of the Party must most resolutely combat these deviations from revolutionary Marxism." When Bogdanov refused to accept this resolution, he was expelled from the Bolshevik faction.

As we pointed out in Part One of this series, in justifying Bogdanov's expulsion Lenin clearly affirmed his adherence to the Kautskyan doctrine that the party should include all social democrats (i.e., working-class-oriented socialists). He sharply distinguished between the Kautskyan "party" and a faction, the latter requiring a homogeneous political program and outlook:

"In our Party Bolshevism is represented by the Bolshevik section. But a section is not a party. A party can contain a whole gamut of opinions and shades of opinions, the extremes of which may be sharply contradictory. In the German party, side by side with the pronouncedly revolutionary wing of Kautsky, we see the ultra-revisionist wing of Bernstein. This is not the case within a section. A section in a party is a group of *like-minded persons* formed for the purpose primarily of influencing the party in a definite direction, for the purpose of securing acceptance for their principles in the purest form. For this, real *unanimity of opinion* is necessary. The different standards we set for *party* unity and *sectional* unity must be grasped by everyone who wants to know how the question of internal discord in the Bolshevik section really stands." [emphasis in original]

—"Report on the Conference of the Extended Editorial Board of *Proletary*" (July 1909)

After Bogdanov's expulsion he and his co-thinkers established their own group around the paper *Vperyod*, deliberately choosing the name of the first Bolshevik organ (of 1905). The *Vperyodists* appealed to the Bolshevik ranks in the name of true Bolshevism. Though many Bolshevik workers supported the Otzovist/Ulmatist position on participating in the Duma, they were unwilling to split from Lenin's organization on this question. Thus Lenin had to combat diffuse ultraleft attitudes from the Bolshevik ranks for the next

few years until the Otzovist/Ulmatist tendencies completely dissipated.

The Otzovist/Ulmatist claim to represent the true Bolshevik tradition, and that Lenin had become a Menshevik conciliator, could not be dismissed out of hand as ridiculous. Bogdanov, Lyadov, Krasin and Alexinsky had been among Lenin's chief lieutenants, the core of the early Bolshevik center. Lunacharsky had been a prominent Bolshevik public spokesman. The Mensheviks thus baited Lenin over the defection of his best-known and most talented collaborators. Through the 1907-09 factional struggle against Otzovism/Ulmatism, a new Leninist leadership was crystallized from among the more junior Bolshevik cadre—Zinoviev, Kamenev, Rykov, Tomsy and a little later Stalin. This was to be the central core of the Bolshevik leadership right through the early period of the Soviet regime.

How does one account for the fact that most of the first generation of Bolshevik leaders defected to ultraleftism, giving way to a second generation which assimilated Leninism in its developing maturity? The Bolsheviks originated not only as the revolutionary wing of Russian Social Democracy, but were also *empirically optimistic* about the perspectives for revolutionary struggle. And this self-confident optimism was borne out by events. The period 1903 to 1907 was in general one of a rising line of revolutionary struggle enabling the Bolsheviks to become a mass party. It is understandable therefore that a section of the Bolsheviks would be unwilling to face the fact of a victorious reaction which required a broad organizational retreat. These Bolsheviks reacted to an unfavorable reality with a sterile, dogmatic radicalism which at the extreme took the form of socialist spiritualism. It is a mark of Lenin's greatness as a revolutionary politician that he fully recognized the victory of reaction and adapted the perspectives of the proletarian vanguard accordingly, though this meant breaking with some of his hitherto closest collaborators.

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# The Final Split with the Mensheviks



Following Stolypin's coup of June 1907, the RSDRP was illegalized and its Duma representatives arrested. Party fractions could continue to exist in legal and semi-legal workers organizations (e.g., trade unions, cooperatives), but the party as such could only exist as an underground organization. The party's full program could only be presented in an illegal press. By late 1907-early 1908, the RSDRP local committees had to go underground if they were to survive as functioning bodies.

The necessary transformation into an underground organization would in itself result in a considerable contraction of the party. Many raw workers and radicalized intellectuals won to the party during the revolutionary period were unwilling or incapable of functioning in an underground network. Furthermore, the wave of despair which passed over the working masses with the victory of tsarist reaction reinforced the exodus from the illegal and persecuted RSDRP. By 1908, the RSDRP could exist only as a relatively narrow network of committed revolutionaries.

## Menshevik Liquidationism and Its Purposes

Thus the conditions in 1908 resurrected the original organizational differences which had split Russian Social Democracy into the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. As we have seen, at the 1906 "Reunification" Congress the Mensheviks accepted Lenin's definition of membership because, under the relatively open conditions then prevailing, formal organizational participation and discipline were not a bar to broad recruitment. But by 1908 the old dispute between a narrow, centralized party versus a broad, amorphous organization broke out with renewed fury.

Most of the Menshevik cadre did not follow the Bolsheviks into the underground. Under the guidance of A.N. Potresov, the leading member of their tendency in Russia, the Menshevik cadre limited themselves to the legal workers organization and devoted themselves to producing a legal press. These social-democratic activists, subject to no party organization or discipline, nonetheless considered themselves members of the RSDRP and were so regarded by the Menshevik leadership abroad. Lenin denounced this Menshevik policy as Liquidationism, the de facto dissolution of the RSDRP in favor of an amorphous movement based on liberal-labor politics.

The Bolshevik-Menshevik conflict over Liquidationism cannot be taken simply at face value as an expression of antagonistic organizational principles. Menshevik Liquidationism was strongly conditioned by the fact that the Bolsheviks had a majority in the leading bodies of the official RSDRP. Liquidationism was an extreme form of a more gen-

eral tendency of the Mensheviks to dissociate themselves from the Leninist leadership of the RSDRP.

In late 1907 the RSDRP delegation to the new Duma, in which the Mensheviks were a majority, declared its independence of the exile party center, arguing that this was a necessary legal cover. Publicly denying the subordination of the Duma delegates to the exile party leadership could have been a legitimate security measure. But the Menshevik parliamentarians gave this legal cover a real political content. The opportunist actions of the Menshevik parliamentarians reinforced the Bolshevik ultraleftists, who wanted to boycott the Duma altogether. (On the ultraleft faction within the Bolsheviks, see Part Five of this series.)

In early 1908, the Menshevik leadership in exile (Martov, Dan, Axelrod, Plekhanov) re-established their own factional organ, *Golos Sotsial-Demokrata* (*Voice of the Social Democrat*). In mid-1908, the Menshevik member of the Central Committee resident in Russia, M.I. Broido, resigned from that body ostensibly in protest against the Bolsheviks' armed expropriations. About the same time, the two Menshevik members of the Central Committee abroad, B.I. Goldman and Martynov, circulated a memorandum stating that, in view of the disorganized state of the movement in Russia, the official party leadership should not issue instructions, but instead limit itself to passively monitoring social-democratic activity.

Had Martov, rather than Lenin, been the head of the official RSDRP, the Mensheviks would no doubt have been utterly loyal toward the established party organization (and moreover have ruthlessly used the party rules as a sword to cut the Bolsheviks to pieces). However, as against the Leninists, the Mensheviks were opposed in principle to defining the social-democratic party as an underground organization. Martov's position on the relation of an underground organization to the party is precisely stated in the August-September 1909 issue of *Golos Sotsial-Demokrata*:

"A more or less defined and to a certain extent conspiratorial organization now makes sense (and great sense) only in so far as it takes part in the construction of a social-democratic party, which by necessity is less defined and has its main points of support in open workers organizations." [emphasis in original]

—quoted in Israel Getzler, *Martov* (1967)

This position for limiting the significance of the underground represented both a desire for bourgeois-liberal respectability and a tendency to identify the party with broad, inclusive workers organizations.

The Mensheviks were prepared to engage in illegal, clandestine activity to further their own program and organization, while opposing an underground party as such. Beginning in 1911 the Menshevik Liquidators created their own underground network, though this was not as effective as the Bolsheviks' nor did it attain the latter's mass influence.

Menshevik Liquidationism of 1908-12 was an extreme expression of social-democratic opportunism resulting from the following major factors: 1) a desire for bourgeois-liberal respectability; 2) a general bias toward identifying the party with broad, inclusive workers organizations; 3) the fact that such organizations were legal, while the party as such was not; 4) Lenin's leadership of the official RSDRP; and 5) the organizational weakness of the Mensheviks.

## The Battle Is Joined

The battle over Liquidationism was first formally joined at the RSDRP conference held in Paris in December 1908.



At this conference the Bolsheviks had five delegates (three of them ultraleftists) and their allies, Luxemburg/Jogiches' Polish Social Democrats, had five; the Mensheviks had three delegates and their allies, the Jewish Bund, had three.

All participants at this conference (except the ultraleft Bolsheviks) recognized that the revolutionary situation was definitely over, and that an indefinite period of reaction lay ahead. The party's tasks and perspectives would have to be changed accordingly. In this context Lenin asserted the need for the primacy of the illegal party organization. Lenin's resolution on this question passed, with the Mensheviks voting against and the Bundists splitting:

"The changed political conditions make it increasingly impossible to contain Social Democratic activity within the framework of the legal and semi-legal workers' organizations....

"The party must devote particular attention to the utilization and strengthening of existing illegal, semi-legal and where possible legal organizations—and to the creation of new ones—which can serve it as strong points for agitational, propagandistic and practical organizational work among the masses.... This work will be possible and fruitful only if there exists in each industrial enterprise a workers' committee, consisting only of party members even if they are few in number, which will be closely linked to the masses, and if all work of the legal organizations is conducted *under the guidance of the illegal party organization.*" [our emphasis]

—Robert H. McNeal, ed., *Resolutions and Decisions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (1974)

Lenin used his majority at the 1908 RSDRP conference to condemn Liquidationism by name, presenting it as an expression of the instability and careerism of the radical intelligentsia:

"Noting that in many places a section of the party intelligentsia is attempting to liquidate the existing organization of the RSDRP and to replace it by a shapeless amalgamation within the framework of legality, whatever this might cost—even at the price of the open rejection of the Programme, tasks, and traditions of the party—the Conference finds it essential to conduct the most resolute ideological and organizational struggle against these liquidationist efforts."

—Ibid.

As we have already discussed (in Part One), Lenin regarded Menshevism as an expression of the interests and attitudes of the radical intelligentsia, rather than as an opportunist current *internal* to the workers movement. In this Lenin followed Kautsky's methodology, which located the sociological basis of revisionism in the petty-bourgeois fellow travelers of Social Democracy.

The Mensheviks likewise accused Lenin's Bolsheviks of representing a petty-bourgeois deviation...anarchism. For example, in early 1908 Plekhanov described the launching of the Menshevik organ, *Golos Sotsial-Demokrata*, as a first step toward "the triumph of social-democratic principles over bolshevik Bakuninism" (quoted in Leonard Schapiro, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union* [1960]). The Mensheviks explained away the Bolsheviks' working-class support by arguing that the Leninists demagogically exploited the primitiveness of the Russian proletariat, a proletariat still closely tied to the peasantry.

Thus both sides accused the other of not being *real* social democrats (i.e., working-class-oriented socialists). The Bolsheviks viewed the Mensheviks as petty-bourgeois democrats, the left wing of bourgeois liberalism, the radicalized children of the Cadets. The Mensheviks condemned the Bolsheviks as petty-bourgeois anarchists, radical populists disguised as social democrats. These mutual accusations were not demagogy nor even polemical exaggerations; they genu-

inely expressed the way in which the Bolsheviks viewed the Mensheviks and vice versa. Since both sides adhered to the principle of a unitary party of all social democrats, the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks could justify their split only by declaring that the other group was not really part of the proletarian socialist movement.

### Pro-Party Mensheviks and Bolshevik Conciliators

In late 1908, Lenin's campaign against the Liquidators got a boost from a most unexpected source...Plekhanov. The grand old man of Russian Marxism broke sharply with the Menshevik leadership, established his own paper, *Dnevnik Sotsial-Demokrata* (*Diary of a Social Democrat*), and attacked the abandonment of the established party organizations in words and tone similar to that of Lenin.

Plekhanov's political behavior in 1909-11 is on the face of it puzzling since he had hitherto been on the extreme right wing of the Mensheviks on almost all questions, including vociferously advocating a split with Lenin. Subjective considerations may have played a role. Plekhanov was extremely prideful and may well have resented being eclipsed by the younger Menshevik leaders (e.g., Martov, Potresov). He may have considered that a "pro-Party" Menshevik stance would enable him to re-establish himself as the premier authority of Russian Social Democracy.

However, Plekhanov's anti-Liquidator position is not at such variance with his general political outlook as might first appear. Plekhanov always believed in the need for a Marxist (i.e., scientific socialist) leadership over working-class spontaneity. It was this belief that impelled him into intransigent struggle against Economism in 1900. Paradoxically, Plekhanov's right-wing position on the revolution of 1905 reinforced his distrust of mass spontaneity. For Plekhanov, a strong social-democratic party was needed *to restrain* what he believed were the anarchistic, primitivist impulses of the Russian proletariat. In the conflict between Plekhanov and the Menshevik Liquidators we see the difference between an orthodox, pre-1914 Marxist, committed to a bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia, and a group of labor reformists primarily concerned with defending the immediate economic interests of Russian workers.

Plekhanov's "pro-Party" Mensheviks were small in number and only some of these eventually fused with the Bolsheviks. Plekhanov himself opposed Lenin when, at the Prague Conference in January 1912, the latter declared the Bolsheviks to be the RSDRP, thus creating a separate Bolshevik Party. However, the impact of Plekhanov's "pro-Party" Mensheviks on the factional struggle was greatly disproportionate to their meager numbers. Plekhanov retained great authority in the international and Russian social-democratic movement. His strident accusations that the main body of Mensheviks were liquidating the social-democratic party enormously enhanced the credibility of Lenin's position, since Plekhanov could not easily be accused of factional distortion or exaggeration. The few "pro-Party" Mensheviks who did join the Bolsheviks in 1912 greatly added to the legitimacy of Lenin's claim to represent the continuity of the official RSDRP.

By 1909, the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in Russia had split into two separate groups competing for mass influence. At a conference of the Bolshevik leadership in mid-1909, Lenin argued that the Bolshevik faction had in fact become the RSDRP:

"One thing must be borne firmly in mind: the responsibility of 'preserving and consolidating' the R.S.D.L.P., of which the resolution speaks, *now rests primarily, if not entirely*, on the Bolshevik section. *All, or practically all*, the Party work in progress, particularly in the localities, is now being shouldered by the Bolsheviks." [our emphasis]

—"Report on the Conference of the Extended Editorial Board of *Proletary*" (July 1909)

At the same time he stressed the importance of uniting with Plekhanov's "pro-Party" Mensheviks:

"What then are the tasks of the Bolsheviks in relation to this as yet small section of the Mensheviks who are fighting against liquidationism on the right? The Bolsheviks must undoubtedly seek *rapprochement* with this section, those who are Marxists and partyists." [emphasis in original]

—*Op. cit.*

Lenin's position that the Bolsheviks (hopefully in alliance with the Plekhanovites) should build the party without and against the majority of Mensheviks ran into significant resistance among the Bolshevik leadership and also ranks. A strong faction of conciliators emerged, led by Dobruvinsky (a former Duma deputy), Rykov, Nogin and Lozovsky, which stood for a political compromise with the Mensheviks in order to restore a unified RSDRP.

In a sense the forces of conciliation were stronger in Berlin than in St. Petersburg or Moscow. The German Social Democratic (SPD) leadership remained ever desirous of Russian party unity. In a particularly sentimental mood, Kautsky expressed his attitude on the antagonistic Russian factions in a letter (5 May 1911) to Plekhanov:

"These days I had visits from Bolsheviks, ... Mensheviks, Otzovists [ultraleftists], and Liquidators. They are all dear people and when talking to them one does not notice great differences of opinion."

—quoted in Getzler, *Op. cit.*

The SPD leadership opened up their press to the most important of Russian conciliators—Trotsky. Trotsky's articles in the influential SPD press turned international social-democratic opinion strongly in favor of unity of the Russian party and against the extremists on both sides, Lenin for the Bolsheviks and Potresov for the Mensheviks.

### Lenin Fights for a Bolshevik Party

Faced with a strong pro-unity group within his own ranks and under pressure from Plekhanov's "pro-Party" Mensheviks and the SPD leadership, Lenin reluctantly agreed to another attempt at unity. This was the January 1910 plenum held in Paris. Representation at the plenum closely replicated the last, 1907 party congress. The Bolsheviks had four delegates (three of them conciliators) as did the Mensheviks. The pro-Menshevik Jewish Bund had two delegates as did the pro-Bolshevik Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL) of Luxemburg/Jogiches. The nominally pro-Bolshevik united Latvian Social Democrats and the ultraleft *Vperyod* group had one delegate each.

At the plenum the conciliatory elements imposed a series of compromises on the leadership of the two basic tendencies. The factional composition of the leading party bodies (the Editorial Board of the central organ, the Foreign Bureau and Russian Board of the Central Committee) established at the 1907 congress was maintained. Parity between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks was maintained on all party bodies, thus placing the balance of power in the hands of the national social-democratic parties.

On the key question of the underground, a compromise resolution was worked out. Opposing or belittling the under-

ground organization was condemned, but the term "liquidationism" was avoided because of its anti-Menshevik factional connotation. In turn, the Mensheviks got the moral satisfaction of condemning the Bolsheviks' armed expropriations as a violation of party discipline.

The artificiality of the 1910 "unity" agreement was indicated by the Mensheviks' refusal to allow Lenin to administer the party funds. The party treasury was therefore placed in the hands of three German trustees—Kautsky, Klara Zetkin and Franz Mehring. (Kautsky, who was not sentimental where money was concerned, later kept the Russian party treasury on the grounds that it had no legitimate, representative leading body.) Lenin's critical and distrustful attitude toward the results of the Paris Central Committee plenum was expressed in a letter (11 April 1910) to Maxim Gorky:

"At the C.C. plenum (the 'long plenum'—three weeks of agony, all nerves were on edge, the devil to pay!)...a mood of 'conciliation in general' (without any clear idea of with whom, for what, and how); hatred of the Bolshevik Center for its implacable ideological struggle; squabbling on the part of the Mensheviks, who were spoiling for a fight, and as a result—an infant covered with blisters.

"And so we have to suffer. Either—at best—we cut open the blisters, let out the pus, and cure and rear the infant.

"Or, at worst—the infant dies. Then we shall be childless for a while (that is, we shall re-establish the Bolshevik faction) and then give birth to a more healthy infant."

Lenin's distrust of the Mensheviks was quickly borne out. The Menshevik Liquidators in Russia, led by P.A. Garvi, flatly refused to enter the Russian Board of the Central Committee as agreed at the Paris plenum. Thus Lenin was able to place the blame for the split on the Mensheviks and put the Bolshevik conciliators on the defensive. Years later, Martov still berated Garvi for his tactical blunder, which greatly aided Lenin.

In late 1910, Lenin declared that the Mensheviks had broken the agreements made at the Paris plenum and so the Bolsheviks were no longer bound by them. In May 1911, Lenin called a rump meeting of leading Bolsheviks and their Polish allies, which set up ad hoc bodies to replace the official RSDRP organs established at the Paris plenum. For example, a Technical Committee was set up to replace the Foreign Bureau of the Central Committee as the party's highest administrative body. For Lenin this was a decisive step in building a party without and against most of the Mensheviks.

At this point Lenin's plans were impeded by the emergence of a new and temporarily powerful conciliator—Leo Jogiches, leader of the SDKPiL. Jogiches was a formidable antagonist. Together with the Bolshevik conciliators (e.g., Rykov) he had a majority on the leading party bodies, such as the Technical Committee. Through Rosa Luxemburg he influenced the German trustees of the RSDRP funds.

The 1911 fight between Jogiches and Lenin is often dismissed, particularly by bourgeois historians, as a personal power struggle. However, underlying the SDKPiL-Bolshevik schism in 1911-14 was the difference between an orthodox social-democratic position on the party question and emerging Leninism. Luxemburg/Jogiches were prepared to support the Bolshevik *faction* within a unitary social-democratic party. They would not support the transformation of the Bolshevik group into a party claiming to be the sole legitimate representative of social democracy. And Jogiches understood that this was what Lenin was in fact doing. In a letter to Kautsky (30 June 1911) concerning finances, he wrote that Lenin "wants to use the chaos in the party to get the money



for his own faction and to deal a death blow to the party as a whole" (quoted in J.P. Nettle, *Rosa Luxemburg* [1966]).

Lenin's attitude to Jogiches and the other conciliators is clearly expressed in a draft article, "The State of Affairs in the Party" (July 1911):

"The 'conciliators' have *not understood* the ideological roots of what keeps us apart from the liquidators, and have therefore left them a number of *loopholes* and have frequently been (involuntarily) a plaything in the hands of the liquidators....

"Since the revolution, the Bolsheviks, as a trend, have lived through two errors—(1) otzovism-Vperyodism and (2) conciliationism (wobbling in the direction of the liquidators). It is time to get rid of both.

"We Bolsheviks have resolved *on no account* to repeat (and *not to allow* a repetition of) the error of conciliationism *today*. This would mean slowing down the rebuilding of the R.S.D.L.P., and entangling it in a new game with the Golos people (or their lackies, like Trotsky), the Vperyodists and so forth." [emphasis in original]

In late 1911, Lenin broke with Jogiches and the Bolshevik conciliators. He sent an agent, Ordzhonikidze, to Russia where the latter set up the Russian Organizing Committee (ROC) which claimed to be an interim Central Committee of the RSDRP. The ROC called an "all-Russian conference of the RSDRP," which met in Prague in January 1912. Fourteen delegates attended, twelve Bolsheviks and two "pro-Party" Mensheviks, one of whom expressed Plekhanov's opposition to the conference as an anti-unity act.

The conference declared that the Menshevik Liquidators stood outside the RSDRP. It also scrapped the nationally federated structure established at the 1906 "Reunification" Congress, in effect excluding the Bund, SDKPiL and Latvian Social Democrats from the Russian party. The conference elected a new Central Committee consisting of six "hard" (anti-conciliator) Bolsheviks and one "pro-Party" Menshevik for symbolic effect. The Prague Conference marked the definitive organizational break between Lenin's revolutionary social democrats and the opportunist Mensheviks. In that important sense Prague 1912 was the founding conference of the Bolshevik Party.

### Did Lenin Seek Unity with the Mensheviks?

Even before 1912, Lenin was commonly regarded as a fanatical splitter, as the great schismatic of Russian Social Democracy. The world-historic significance of the Bolshevik-Menshevik split is now universally recognized, not least by anti-Leninists. It is therefore astounding that anybody, particularly a group claiming to be Leninist, could maintain that the Bolshevik leader was a staunch advocate of social-democratic unity, while the Mensheviks were the aggressive splitters.

Yet this is just the position taken by the revisionist "Trotskyist" International Marxist Group (IMG), British section of Ernest Mandel's United Secretariat. As a theoretical justification for a grand regroupment maneuver, the IMG has revised the history of the Bolsheviks to make Lenin out as a unity-above-all conciliator. Referring to the post-1905 period, the IMG writes:

"Far from Lenin being the splitter, far from posing merely 'formal unity,' the Bolsheviks were the chief fighters for the unity of the Party.... It was the Mensheviks in this period who were the splitters and not Lenin."

—"The Bolshevik Faction and the Fight for the Party,"  
*Red Weekly*, 11 November 1976

The complete falsity of this position is demonstrated by a series of incredible omissions. This article does not mention the real Bolshevik conciliators, like Rykov, and Lenin's fight

against them. It does not mention the 1910 Paris "unity" plenum and Lenin's opposition to the compromises made there. It does not mention that Lenin's erstwhile factional allies, Plekhanov and Jogiches/Luxemburg, opposed the Prague Conference in the name of party unity and subsequently denounced Lenin as a splitter.

This is the IMG's analysis of the Prague Conference:

"The task of the Bolsheviks and the pro-Party Mensheviks in reconsolidating the illegal RSDLP had been accomplished by the end of 1911—although by this time Plekhanov himself had deserted to the liquidators. This reconsolidation was finalised at the Sixth Party Congress [sic] held in Prague in January 1912. At this congress there was *not* a split with *Menshevism* as such—on the contrary...Lenin worked for the congress with a section of the Mensheviks. The split was not with those who defended Menshevik politics but with the liquidators who refused to accept the Party." [emphasis in original]

—*Op. cit.*

It was precisely the Mensheviks' *politics* on the organizational question which generated Liquidationism. From the original 1903 split right down to World War I the Mensheviks defined "the party" to include workers sympathetic to social democracy, but who were not subject to formal organizational membership and discipline. It was on that basis that the Mensheviks continually rejected and disregarded Lenin's formal majorities and consequent party leadership.

The statement that Plekhanov rejoined the Liquidators in 1911 is false. And in this historical inaccuracy the IMG demonstrates its fundamental miscomprehension of relations between the Bolsheviks and "pro-Party" Mensheviks. Plekhanov did not rejoin the main body of Mensheviks. Like Trotsky and Luxemburg, he adopted an independent stance in 1912-14, urging the reunification of the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks.

The IMG cannot explain *why* Plekhanov, who fought the Liquidators for three years, then refused to split with them and unite with the Leninists. When Plekhanov, who was notoriously arrogant, began his anti-Liquidator campaign in late 1908, he undoubtedly believed he would win over the majority of Mensheviks and possibly become the leading figure in a reunified RSDRP. Even while blocking with Plekhanov, Lenin had occasion to debunk the dissident Menshevik leader's self-serving illusions:

"The Menshevik Osip [Plekhanov] has proved to be a lone figure, who has resigned both from the official Menshevik editorial board and from the collective editorial board of the most important Menshevik work, a lone protester against 'petty bourgeois opportunism' and liquidationism."

—"The Liquidators Exposed" (September 1909)

By 1911, it was clear that the Plekhanovites were a small minority among the Mensheviks. Had Plekhanov united with the Bolsheviks at the Prague Conference, he would have been a small and politically isolated minority. He could never hope to win the Bolsheviks to his pro-bourgeois liberal strategy. He would simply have been a figurehead in a de facto Bolshevik party. Being a shrewd politician, Lenin sought to "capture" Plekhanov in this way. But Plekhanov had no intention of serving as a figurehead for the Leninists. In refusing to participate in the Prague Conference, he wrote: "The makeup of your conference is so one-sided that it would be better, i.e., more in the interests of Party unity, if I stayed away" (quoted in Bertram D. Wolfe, *Three Who Made a Revolution* [1948]).

Even before 1912, the Bolsheviks were essentially a party, rather than a faction, because Lenin would refuse to act as a

disciplined minority under a Menshevik leadership. The Menshevik leaders, including Plekhanov, reciprocated this attitude. Unity with the numerically small "pro-Party" Mensheviks did not challenge Lenin's leadership of the party as he reconstructed it at the Prague Conference. Had the Plekhanovites been larger than the Bolsheviks, Lenin would have fought for another organizational arrangement which would allow his supporters to act as revolutionary social democrats unimpeded by the opportunists.

## Unity Attempts After Prague

After the Prague Conference, the Bolsheviks were bombarded with continual unity campaigns involving most major figures in the Russian movement and also the leadership of the Second International. These campaigns culminated in a pro-unity resolution by the International Socialist Bureau (ISB) in December 1913, which led to a "unity" conference in Brussels in July 1914. Less than a month later most of the unity-mongers of the Second International were supporting their own ruling classes in killing the workers of "enemy" countries.

The first attempt to reverse Lenin's action at the Prague Conference was taken by Trotsky. He pressured the Menshevik Organizing Committee into calling a conference of all Russian social democrats. The Bolsheviks naturally refused to participate as did their former allies, the Plekhanovites and Luxemburg/Jogiches' SDKPiL. The conference met in Vienna in August 1912. In addition to Trotsky's small group, it was attended by the main body of Mensheviks, the Bund and also the ultra-left *Vperyod* group. The "August bloc" thus combined the extreme right wing and extreme left wing of Russian Social Democracy. Naturally the participants could agree on nothing except hostility to the Leninists for declaring themselves the official RSDRP. In fact, the *Vperyodists* walked out in the middle leaving the conference as a Menshevik forum.

Trotsky's "August bloc" was a classic centrist rotten bloc—a fleeting coalition of the most heterogeneous elements against a hard revolutionary tendency. After he was won to Leninism in 1917, Trotsky regarded the "August bloc" as his greatest political error. Polemicizing against another centrist rotten bloc in the American section of the Fourth International in 1940, Trotsky looked back on the 1912 "August bloc":

"I have in mind the so-called August bloc of 1912. I participated actively in this bloc. In a certain sense I created it. Politically I differed with the Mensheviks on all fundamental questions. I also differed with the ultra-left Bolsheviks, the *Vperyodists*. In the general tendency of policies I stood far more closely to the Bolsheviks. But I was against the Leninist 'regime' because I had not yet learned to understand that in order to realize a revolutionary goal a firmly welded centralized party is necessary. And so I formed this episodic bloc consisting of heterogeneous elements which was directed against the proletarian wing of the party....

"Lenin subjected the August bloc to merciless criticism and the harshest blows fell to my lot. Lenin proved that inasmuch as I did not agree politically with either the Mensheviks or the *Vperyodists* my policy was adventurism. This was severe but it was true."

—*In Defense of Marxism* (1940)

The consolidation of a separate Bolshevik Party at the Prague Conference coincided with the beginning of a new rising line of proletarian class struggle in Russia. In the next two and a half years the Bolsheviks transformed themselves once again into a mass proletarian party. In 1913, Lenin

claimed 30,000-50,000 members. In the Duma elections in late 1912 the Bolsheviks elected six out of nine delegates in the workers curia. In 1914, Lenin claimed 2,800 workers groups as against 600 for the Mensheviks. The Bolsheviks' legal organ, *Pravda*, had a circulation of 40,000 compared to 16,000 for the Mensheviks' *Luch*.

Privately the Mensheviks admitted the Bolsheviks' predominance in the workers movement and their own weakness. In a letter (15 September 1913) to Potresov, Martov wrote: "The Mensheviks seem unable to move away from the dead center in the organizational sense and remain, in spite of the newspaper and of everything done in the last two years, a weak circle" (quoted in Getzler, *Op. cit.*).

While the transformation of the Bolsheviks into a mass party at this time was of enormous significance to the revolutionary cause, in one sense it could be said to have impeded the *theoretical* development of Leninism. Developments in 1912-14 appeared to confirm Lenin's belief that the Mensheviks were simply petty-bourgeois careerists in Russia and émigré literati standing outside the real workers movement. The Bolsheviks' claim to be *the* Russian Social Democratic Labor Party seemed to be empirically vindicated. And thus Lenin believed that he hadn't really split *the* social-democratic party.

The Prague Conference in January 1912 represented the definitive split between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, but the split was not comprehensive. The six Bolshevik deputies elected to the Fourth Duma in late 1912 maintained a common front with the seven Menshevik deputies in a unitary social-democratic fraction. Among the less advanced workers, sentiment for unity was still strong and this created resistance among the Bolsheviks to splitting the Duma fraction, a public act. Lenin oriented toward splitting the Duma fraction, but did so with considerable tactical caution. Only in late 1913 did the Bolshevik deputies openly split and create their own Duma fraction.

The split in the Duma fraction had a far greater impact on international Social Democracy than the Prague Conference since it made the division in the Russian movement all too public. At Rosa Luxemburg's initiative, the ISB intervened to restore unity in the seemingly incorrigibly fractious Russian social-democratic movement. The ISB's pro-unity policy was necessarily damaging, if not outright hostile, to the Bolsheviks. Luxemburg's motives were clearly hostile to Lenin. In urging the International's intervention, she denounced "the systematic incitement by Lenin's group of the split among the ranks of other social democratic organisations" (quoted in H.H. Fisher and Olga Hess Gankin, eds., *The Bolsheviks and the World War* [1940]).

In December 1913, the ISB adopted a resolution calling for the reunification of Russian Social Democracy. This resolution was co-sponsored by three German leaders, Kautsky, Ebert and Molkenbuhr:

"The International Bureau considers it the urgent duty of all social democratic groups in Russia to make a serious and loyal attempt to agree to the restoration of a single party organization and to put an end to the present harmful and discouraging state of disunion."

—*Ibid.*

The ISB then arranged a Russian "unity" conference in Brussels in July 1914. The authority of the German-led International was such that all Russian social democrats, including the Bolsheviks, felt obliged to attend this meeting. In addition to the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, the Brussels



Conference was attended by the *Vperyodists*, Trotsky's group, Plekhanov's group, the Latvian Social Democrats and three Polish groups.

Needless to say, Lenin was hostile to the purpose of the Brussels Conference. While he wrote a lengthy report for it, he showed his disdain by not attending in person. The head of the Bolshevik delegation was Inessa Armand. Lenin drafted "unity conditions" which he knew the Mensheviks would reject out of hand. These involved the complete organizational subordination of the Mensheviks to the Bolshevik majority, including the prohibition of a separate Menshevik press and a total ban on public criticism of the underground party. When Armand presented Lenin's "unity conditions," the Mensheviks were furious. Plekhanov termed them "articles of a new penal code." Kautsky, the chairman of the conference, had difficulty keeping order. Nonetheless, the respected German leader dutifully presented a motion stating that there were no principled differences barring unity. This resolution carried with the Bolsheviks (and also the Latvian Social Democrats) refusing to vote.

### Lenin's Justification for the Split

The report to the July 1914 Brussels Conference was Lenin's most comprehensive justification for the split and creation of a separate Bolshevik party. It was intended to present the Bolshevik case in the most favorable way before West European social-democratic opinion. Thus, the report probably doesn't fully express Lenin's views on Bolshevik-Menshevik relations.

The report presents two basic arguments, one political, the other empirical. Lenin's basic political argument is that the majority of Mensheviks, by rejecting the underground organization as *the* party, stand qualitatively to the right of the opportunists (e.g., Bernstein) in the West European social democracies:

"We see how mistaken is the opinion that our differences with the liquidators are no deeper and are less important than those between the so-called radicals and moderates in Western Europe. There is not a single—literally not a single—West-European party that has ever had occasion to adopt a general party decision against people who desired to *dissolve* the party and to *substitute* a new one for it!

"Nowhere in Western Europe has there ever been, nor can there ever be, a question of whether it is permissible to bear the title of party member *and at the same time* advocate the dissolution of that party, to argue that the party is useless and unnecessary, and that another party be substituted for it. Nowhere in Western Europe does the question concern the very *existence* of the party as it does with us....

"This is not a disagreement over a question of organization, of *how* the party should be built, but a disagreement concerning the very *existence* of the party. Here, conciliation, agreement and compromise are totally out of the question." [emphasis in original]

—"Report of the C.C. of the R.S.D.L.P. to the Brussels Conferences and Instructions to the C.C. Delegation" (June 1914)

This view of Menshevik Liquidationism is superficial, focusing on the specific *form*, rather than the political substance, of social-democratic opportunism. Lenin's belief that the Russian Mensheviks were to the right of Bernstein, Jaurès, etc. turned out to be false. The war found the small group of Martovite Internationalists who had served as a fig leaf to the Mensheviks not only far to the left of the German social-patriots Ebert/Noske, but also to the left of the SPD centrists Kautsky/Haase. The root cause of the Mensheviks' organizational liquidationism in 1908-12 was not that Mar-

tov/Potresov stood qualitatively to the right of Bernstein and Noske, but rather that Lenin, formally the leader of the RSDRP, stood to the left of Bebel/Kautsky.

Most of the report to the Brussels Conference seeks to demonstrate empirically that "a majority of four-fifths of the class-conscious workers of Russia have rallied around the decisions and bodies created by the January [Prague] Conference of 1912." It is important to emphasize that this was not an argument just for public consumption. For Lenin one of the decisive criteria of a real social-democratic party was the extent of its proletarian following. In his *private* notes to Inessa Armand, he wrote:

"In Russia, nearly every group, or 'faction'...accuses the other of being *not* a workers' group, but a bourgeois intellectualist group. We consider this accusation or rather argument, this reference to the social significance of a particular group, *extremely important in principle*. But precisely because we consider it extremely important, we deem it our duty not to make sweeping statements about the social significance of other groups, but to back *our* statements with *objective* facts. For these objective facts prove absolutely and irrefutably that Pravidism [Bolshevism] *alone* is a *workers'* trend in Russia, whereas liquidationism and Socialist-Revolutionism are *in fact* bourgeois intellectualist trends." [emphasis in original]

—*Ibid.*

As can be seen from the above quote, had the Mensheviks in this period acquired a significant proletarian base, Lenin would have had either to adopt a more conciliatory attitude toward them or justify the split on more general principles.

Lenin's view of the Mensheviks as a petty-bourgeois intellectualist trend external to the workers movement was impressionistic. The wave of patriotism and national defensism which swept the Russian masses in the first years of the war benefited the opportunistic Mensheviks at the expense of the Leninists, who were intransigent defeatists. When the Russian Revolution broke out in February 1917, the Mensheviks were far stronger relative to the Bolsheviks than they had been in 1914.

During 1912-14, Lenin's innumerable polemics against unity with the Mensheviks presented a number of different arguments. Some of these arguments were narrow or empirical, as in the report to the Brussels Conference. However, in other writings Lenin *anticipated* the split in principle with opportunists in the workers movement which defines the modern communist party. Thus in an April 1914 polemic against Trotsky, entitled "Unity," Lenin writes:

"There can be no unity, federal or other, with liberal-labor politicians, with disrupters of the working-class movement, with those who defy the will of the majority. There can and must be unity among all consistent Marxists, among all those who stand for the entire Marxist body and the uncurtailed slogans, independently of the liquidators and apart from them.

"Unity is a great thing and a great slogan. But what the workers' cause needs is the *unity of Marxists*, not unity between Marxists, and opponents and distorters of Marxism." [emphasis in original]

However, it was not until 4 August 1914, when the parliamentary fraction of the German Social Democracy voted for war credits, that Lenin was made to understand the epochal significance of the above passage, of his break with the Russian Mensheviks. Only then did Lenin seek to split the consistent, i.e., revolutionary, Marxists from all the liberal-labor politicians and all the opponents and distorters of Marxism. In so doing he created communism as a world-historic revolutionary doctrine and movement, as the Marxism of the epoch of capitalism's death agony.

# Toward the Communist International



The event which transformed Lenin from a Russian revolutionary social democrat into the founding leader of the world communist movement can be precisely dated—4 August 1914. With the start of World War I the parliamentary fraction of the German SPD voted unanimously in favor of war credits for the Reich. Having now experienced more than 60 years of later social-democratic and then Stalinist betrayals of socialist principle, it is difficult today for us to appreciate the absolutely shocking impact of August 4th upon the revolutionaries in the Second International. Luxemburg suffered a nervous collapse in reaction to the wave of national chauvinism which swept the German social-democratic movement. Lenin at first refused to believe the report of the Reichstag vote in the SPD's organ, *Vorwärts*, dismissing that issue as a forgery by the Kaiser's government.

For revolutionary social democrats, August 4th did not simply destroy their illusions in a particular party and its leadership but challenged their entire political worldview. For Marxists of Lenin's and Luxemburg's generation, the progress of Social Democracy, best represented in Germany, had seemed steady, irreversible and inexorable.

## The Historic Significance of the Second International

The era of the Socialist (Second) International (1889-1914) represented the extraordinarily rapid growth of the European labor movement and of the Marxist current within it. Except for the British trade unions (which supported the bourgeois liberals), the organizations making up the First International (1864-74) were propaganda groups numbering at most in the thousands. By 1914, the parties of the Socialist International were mass parties with millions of supporters throughout Europe.

In the period of the First International, there were perhaps a thousand Marxists on the face of the globe, overwhelmingly concentrated in Germany. Significantly, there were *no* French Marxists in the Paris Commune of 1871, only the Hungarian Leo Fränkel. By 1914, Marxism was the most important tendency in the international workers movement, the official doctrine of mass proletarian parties in Central and East Europe. It is understandable therefore that Kautsky and the social democrats should regard Marxism as the natural, inevitable political expression of the modern labor movement.

Britain, it is true, had a mass labor movement which was politically liberal and openly class-collaborationist. However, Marx and Engels themselves had explained the political

backwardness of the British labor movement as the product of particular historic circumstances (e.g., Britain's dominance in the world economy, English-Irish national antagonism, the Empire). Furthermore, Marxists in the Second International, including Lenin, regarded the founding of the Labour Party in 1905 as a significant progressive step toward a mass proletarian socialist party in Britain. Thus the relative political backwardness of the British workers movement did not fundamentally challenge the orthodox social-democratic (i.e., Kautskyan) worldview.

To be sure, the pre-1914 Marxist movement was familiar with renegades and revisionists—the Bernsteinians in Germany, Struve and the “legal Marxists” in Russia. Lenin would have added Plekhanov and the Mensheviks to this list. But these retrogressions toward liberal reformism appeared to affect only the intellectual elements in the social-democratic movement. The SPD as a whole seemed solidly Marxist in its policies, while Marxism gained against old-fashioned socialist radicalism (e.g., Jaurèsism) in other sections of the International (e.g., the French, Italian).

August 4th was the first great *internal* counterrevolution in the workers movement, and all the more destructive because it was so unexpected. The triumph of chauvinism and class collaborationism in the major parties of the Socialist International shattered the shallow, passive optimism of Kautskyanized Marxism. After the SPD's great betrayal, going over to the side of its “own” bourgeoisie, revolutionary Marxists could no longer regard opportunism in the workers movement as a marginal or episodic phenomenon or as a product of particular historic political backwardness (e.g., Britain).

The established leaderships of most mass socialist parties could hardly be dismissed as unstable, petty-bourgeois democratic intellectuals, as fellow-travelers of Social Democracy. This is how Kautsky had characterized the Bernsteinian revisionists and how Lenin had dismissed the Mensheviks. But the chauvinist leaders of the SPD in 1914—Friedrich Ebert, Gustav Noske, Philipp Scheidemann—had worked their way up from the party's ranks beginning as young men. All three had been workers: Ebert had been a saddler, Noske a butcher and Scheidemann a typesetter. Ebert and Noske began their SPD careers as local trade-union functionaries, Scheidemann as a journalist for a local party paper. The leading chauvinists and opportunists were thus very much of the flesh and blood of the German Social Democracy.

Nor could the actions of the SPD leadership be explained as a reflection of the historic political backwardness of the German working class. Ebert, Noske and Scheidemann had been trained as Marxists by the personal followers of Marx and Engels. They had voted time and time again for revolutionary socialist resolutions. In supporting the war, the SPD leaders *knew* they were violating their party's longstanding socialist principles.

Right up to the fateful Reichstag vote, the SPD engaged in mass antiwar agitation. On 25 July 1914 the party executive issued a proclamation which concluded:

“Comrades, we appeal to you to express at mass meetings without delay the German proletariat's firm determination to maintain peace.... The ruling classes who in time of peace gag you, despise you and exploit you, would misuse you as food for cannon. Everywhere there must sound in the ears of those in power: ‘We will have no war! Down with war! Long live the international brotherhood of peoples!’”

—reproduced in William English Walling, ed.,  
*The Socialists and the War* (1915)

In considering the social-chauvinist betrayal of the German



Social Democracy, Lenin came to realize that the Bolsheviks were not simply a Russian counterpart of the SPD with a principled revolutionary leadership. The selection, testing and training of cadre in Lenin's party were fundamentally different from Bebel's and Kautsky's party. And in that difference lay the reason why in August 1914 the parliamentary representatives of the SPD supported "their" Kaiser, while their counterparts in the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party (Bolsheviks) were instead clapped in the tsar's prisons.

### Lenin Breaks with Social Democracy

Lenin's basic policy toward the war and the international socialist movement was developed within a few weeks after the outbreak of hostilities. This policy had three main elements. One, socialists must stand for the defeat, above all, of their "own" bourgeois state. Two, the war demonstrated that capitalism in the imperialist epoch threatened to destroy civilization. Socialists must therefore work to transform the imperialist war into civil war, into proletarian revolution. And three, the Second International had been destroyed by social-chauvinism. A new, revolutionary international must be built through a complete split with the opportunists in the social-democratic movement.

These policies, which remained central to Lenin's activities right up to the October Revolution, were clearly expressed in his very first articles on the war:

"It is the duty of every socialist to conduct propaganda of the class struggle...work directed towards turning a war of nations into a civil war is the only socialist activity in an era of an imperialist armed conflict of the bourgeoisie of all nations.... Let us raise high the banner of civil war! Imperialism sets at hazard the fate of European culture: this war will be followed by others unless there are a series of successful revolutions....

"The Second International is dead, overcome by opportunism. Down with opportunism, and long live the Third International, purged not only of 'turncoats'...but of opportunists as well.

"The Second International did its share of useful preparatory work in preliminarily organizing the proletarian masses during the long, 'peaceful' period of the most brutal capitalist slavery and most rapid capitalist progress in the last third of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. To the Third International falls the task of organizing the proletarian forces for a revolutionary onslaught against the capitalist governments, for civil war against the bourgeoisie of all countries for the capture of political power, for the triumph of socialism!"

—"The Position and Tasks of the Socialist International" (November 1914)

While Lenin was optimistic about winning over the mass base of the official social-democratic parties, he understood that he was advocating splitting the workers movement into two antagonistic parties, the one revolutionary, the other reformist. Thus Lenin's demand for a Third International encountered far more opposition among antiwar social democrats than his impassioned denunciation of social-chauvinism. In fact, most of Lenin's polemics in this period (1914-16) were not directed at the outright social-chauvinists (Scheidemann, Vandervelde, Plekhanov), but rather at the centrists who apologized for the social-chauvinists (Kautsky) or refused to split with them (Martov).

Thus Lenin was forced to confront and explicitly reject the orthodox social-democratic position on the party question, the Kautskyan "party of the whole class":

"The crisis created by the great war has torn away all coverings, swept away all conventions, exposed an abscess that has long come to a head, and revealed opportunism in its true role of ally of the bourgeoisie. The complete organisational severance of this element from the workers' parties has become



Robert Sennecke

SPD traitors Scheidemann, Noske, Ebert.

imperative.... The old theory that opportunism is a 'legitimate shade' in a single party that knows no 'extremes' has now turned into a tremendous deception of the workers and a tremendous hindrance to the working-class movement. Undisguised opportunism, which immediately repels the working masses, is not so frightful and injurious as this theory of the golden mean.... Kautsky, the most outstanding spokesman of this theory, and also the leading authority in the Second International, has shown himself a consummate hypocrite and a past master in the art of prostituting Marxism."

—"The Collapse of the Second International" (May-June 1915)

In considering the growth of opportunism in the West European social-democratic parties, Lenin naturally reviewed the history of the Russian movement and of Bolshevism. He realized that the Bolshevik organization had not, in fact, been built according to the Kautskyan formula. It had completely organizationally separated formally from the Russian opportunists, the Mensheviks, two and a half years before the outbreak of war and in practice long before 1912. Lenin now took the Bolshevik Party as a *model* for a new, revolutionary international:

"The Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party has long parted company with its opportunists. Besides, the Russian opportunists have now become chauvinists. This only fortifies us in our opinion that a split with them is essential in the interests of socialism.... We are firmly convinced that, in the present state of affairs, a split with the opportunists and chauvinists is the prime duty of revolutionaries, just as a split with the yellow trade unions, the anti-Semites, the liberal workers' unions, was essential in helping speed the enlightenment of backward workers and draw them into the ranks of the Social-Democratic Party.

"In our opinion, the Third International should be built up on that kind of revolutionary basis. To our Party, the question of the expediency of a break with the social-chauvinists does not exist, it has been answered with finality. The only question that exists for our Party is whether this can be achieved on an international scale in the immediate future."

—V. I. Lenin and G. Zinoviev, *Socialism and War* (July-August 1915)

We have maintained in this series that Leninism as a qualitative extension of Marxism arose in 1914-17, when Lenin responded in a revolutionary manner to the imperialist war and the collapse of the Second International into hostile social-chauvinist parties. This view has been contested, on the one hand, by Stalinists who project the cult of the infallibly

clairvoyant revolutionary leader back to the beginning of Lenin's political career and, on the other, by various centrist and left-reformists who want to eradicate or blur the line between Leninism and pre-1914 orthodox Social Democracy (Kautskyism).

Among the Bolsheviks, however, it was generally recognized that Leninism originated in 1914 and not before. In a commemorative article following Lenin's death, Evgenyi Preobrazhensky, one of the leading Bolshevik intellectuals, wrote:

"In Bolshevism or Leninism we must make a strict distinction between two periods—the period roughly before the world war and the period ushered in by the world war. Before the world war, Comrade Lenin, although he held to the real, genuine, undistorted, revolutionary Marxism, did not yet consider the social-democrats to be the agents of capital in the ranks of the proletariat. During this period, you will find more than one article by Comrade Lenin in which he defends this German social-democracy in the face of those accusations and reproaches which it received, for instance, from the camp of the populists, syndicalists, etc., for unrevolutionary opportunism, for betrayal of the revolutionary spirit of Marxism....

"If, to our misfortune, Comrade Lenin had died before the world war, it would never have entered anyone's head to speak of 'Leninism,' as some kind of special version of Marxism, as it was subsequently to become. Lenin was the most consistent revolutionary Marxist.... But there was nothing specific in our Bolshevism in the realm of theory...to distinguish it in any way from the traditional, but truly revolutionary, Marxism....

"If Comrade Lenin had not lived to see this [post-1914] period, he would have entered history as the most eminent leader of the left wing of the Russian social-democracy.... Only the year 1914 transformed him into an international leader. He was the first to pose the basic question: what in a broad sense does this war mean? He replied: this war signifies the beginning of the crash of capitalism and thus the tactics of the workers' movement must be directed towards turning the imperialist war into a civil war."

—"Marxism and Leninism," *Molodoya Gvardiya*, 1924  
[our translation]

## What Did Social-Chauvinism Signify?

Within a few weeks after the outbreak of war, Lenin determined to split with the social-chauvinists and to work for a new, revolutionary international. But he did not immediately present a theoretical (i.e., historical and sociological) explanation as to why and how the mass parties of the West European proletariat had succumbed to opportunism.

Here one might contrast Marx and Lenin as revolutionary politicians. Marx often arrived at theoretical generalizations well in advance of the immediate programmatic, tactical and organizational conclusions which flowed from his new socio-historical premises. Thus in late 1848, after nine months of revolution, Marx concluded that the German bourgeoisie was incapable of overthrowing absolutism. However, it was only a year later in exile that Marx developed a new strategy corresponding to his changed view of German society. In contrast, Lenin's revolutionary thrust frequently led him to break with opportunism and false policies well before he attained corresponding theoretical generalizations.

1914-16 was a period when Lenin's theoretical analysis lagged behind his political conclusions and actions. Lenin's earliest writings on war and the International identified social-democratic opportunism only as a political-ideological current. The only attempt to relate the growth of opportunism to objective historical conditions was the observation that the West European socialist parties functioned under a long period of bourgeois legality.

The absence of a sociological and historical explanation for

social-democratic opportunism was a serious weakness in Lenin's campaign for a Third International. For it had to be demonstrated that August 4th was not an opportunist episode or a reversible false policy to fully justify splitting international Social Democracy. Lenin's fight with the centrists—Kautsky/Haase/Ledebour in Germany, Martov/Axelrod in Russia, the leadership of the Italian Socialist Party—focused on the historic significance of national defensism in the world war and on the depth of opportunism in the social-democratic movement. The centrists maintained that "defense of the fatherland" was a monumental opportunist error, but nothing more. The policy of national defensism could be reversed, the Second International reformed (literally as well as figuratively). Some of the extreme chauvinists would probably have to go, but basically the "good old International" could be restored as of July 1914. Lenin regarded the pre-1914 International as diseased with opportunism; with the war the disease worsened into social-chauvinism and became fatal. For the centrists, the pre-war International was basically a healthy body. It was now passing through the sickness of social-chauvinism. The task of socialists was to cure the sickness and save the patient.

The main spokesman for amnestying the social-chauvinists and minimizing the problem of opportunism was, of course, Kautsky. In *Neue Zeit* (15 February 1915) he advocated an attitude of comradely tolerance for those who "erred" in defending German imperialism:

"It is true I saw since the 4th of August that a number of members of the party were continuously evolving more and more in the direction of imperialism, but I believed these were only exceptions and took an optimistic view. I did this in order to give the comrades confidence and to work against pessimism. And it was equally important to urge the comrades to tolerance, following the example of [Wilhelm] Liebknecht in 1870."

—William English Walling, ed.,  
*The Socialists and the War (1915)*

Centrist softness toward the Second International also expressed itself within the Bolshevik Party early in the war. The head of the Bolshevik group in Switzerland, V.A. Karpinsky, objected to Lenin's position that the Second International had collapsed and a new, revolutionary international must be built. In a letter (27 September 1914) to Lenin he wrote:

"We believe that it would be an exaggeration to define all that happened within the International as its 'ideological-political collapse.' Neither by volume or content would this definition correspond to the real happenings. The International...has suffered an ideological-political collapse, if you like, but on one question only, the military question. With regard to the rest there is no reason to consider that the ideological-political position of the International has wavered or, moreover, that it has been completely destroyed. This would mean that after losing only one redoubt we are unnecessarily surrendering all forts."

—Olga Hess Gankin and H.H. Fisher, eds.,  
*The Bolsheviks and the World War (1940)*

To overcome such centrist attitudes, Lenin had to demonstrate that August 4th was the culmination of opportunist tendencies profoundly rooted in the nature and history of West European Social Democracy.

## Imperialism, Social-Chauvinism and the Labor Bureaucracy

Lenin's analysis of the social bases of opportunism in the Second International was first presented in a resolution ("Opportunism and the Collapse of the Second International")



for a Bolshevik conference in Berne, Switzerland in March 1915:

"Certain strata of the working class (the bureaucracy of the labor movement and the labor aristocracy, who get a fraction of the profits from the exploitation of the colonies and from the privileged position of their 'fatherlands' in the world market), as well as petty-bourgeois sympathizers within the socialist parties, have proved the social mainstay of these [opportunist] tendencies, and channels of bourgeois influence over the proletariat."

This capsule analysis was not developed in any theoretical or empirical depth until the following year, principally in Lenin's pamphlet, *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (written in early 1916), and his article, "Imperialism and the Split in Socialism" (October 1916), and in Zinoviev's book, *The War and the Crisis of Socialism* (August 1916).

Given the Stalinist cult of Lenin and the individualistic interpretations of bourgeois historiography, it is not generally recognized that Lenin worked as part of a collective. During the war years, he had a literary division of labor with Zinoviev in which the latter concentrated on the German movement. Reading only Lenin's writings of this period, one gets a seriously incomplete picture of the Bolshevik position on the imperialist war and international socialist movement. That is why in 1916 both Lenin's and Zinoviev's war writings were collected in a single volume published in German, entitled *Against the Stream*. The principal Leninist analysis of opportunism in the German Social Democracy is Zinoviev's *The War and the Crisis of Socialism*, which contains a long section titled "The Social Roots of Opportunism." This key section of Zinoviev's important work was reproduced in English in the American Shachtmanite journal, *New Internationalist* (March-June 1942).

Marxists had long recognized the existence of a pro-bourgeois, pro-imperialist labor bureaucracy in Britain. Engels had condemned the bourgeoisified leaders of the British trade unions more than a little, relating this phenomenon to Britain's world dominance economically. However, Marxists in the Second International regarded the class-collaborationist British labor movement as a historic anomaly, a stage which European Social Democracy had happily skipped over. In beginning his section on the labor bureaucracy in Germany, Zinoviev states that Marxists had regarded Social Democracy as immune from this corrupt social caste:

"When we spoke of labor bureaucracy before the war we understood by that *almost exclusively* the British trade unions. We had in mind the fundamental work of the Webbs, the caste spirit, the reactionary role of the bureaucracy in the old British trade unionism, and we said to ourselves: how fortunate that we have not been created in that image, how fortunate that this cup of grief has been spared our labor movement on the continent.

"But we have been drinking for a long time out of this very cup. In the labor movement of *Germany*—a movement which served as a model for socialists of all countries before the war—there has arisen just as numerous and just as reactionary a cast of labor bureaucrats." [our emphasis]

The triumph of social-chauvinism in the Second International caused Lenin to reconsider the historic significance of the pro-imperialist British Labour leadership. He came to the conclusion that the class-collaborationist trade unionism of Victorian England *anticipated* tendencies that would come to the fore when other countries, above all Germany, caught up with Britain economically and became competing imperialist powers.

Germany's very rapid industrial growth, following its victorious war in 1870, simultaneously created a powerful mass



Swan

### Zinoviev

social-democratic labor movement and transformed the country into an aggressive imperialist world power. Germany's expansionist goals could only be realized through a major war. And Germany could not win a major war if faced with the active opposition of its powerful labor movement. Thus the objective needs of German imperialism required the cooperation of the social-democratic leadership. The defeat of the German bourgeois-democratic revolution in 1848 and the resulting semi-autocratic class-political structure made a rapprochement between the ruling circles and labor bureaucracy more difficult, less evolutionary than in Britain. Hence the shock effect of August 4th.

But Lenin recognized that the underlying historical process which led in 1914 to the SPD's vote for war credits and to British Labour Party cabinet ministers was similar. In *Imperialism* he wrote:

"It must be observed that in Great Britain the tendency of imperialism to split the workers, to strengthen opportunism among them and to cause *temporary decay* in the working-class movement, revealed itself much earlier than the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries....

"The *distinctive* feature of the present situation is the prevalence of such economic and political conditions that are bound to increase the irreconcilability between opportunism and the general and vital interests of the working-class movement....

"Opportunism cannot now be completely triumphant in the working-class movement of one country for decades as it was in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century; but in a number of countries it has grown ripe, overripe and rotten, and has become completely merged with bourgeois policy in the form of 'social-chauvinism'." [our emphasis]

Lenin's *Imperialism* deals with those changes in the world capitalist system which strengthened opportunist forces in the workers movement internationally. It is Zinoviev's 1916 work that concretely analyzes the forces of opportunism in the German Social Democracy.

Zinoviev showed that the SPD's huge treasury supported a vast number of functionaries who led comfortable petty-bourgeois lives far removed from the workers they supposedly represented. In addition to a relatively high standard of living, the social-democratic officialdom had begun to enjoy a privi-

leged social status. The German ruling elite began to treat the SPD and trade-union leaders with respect, differentiating between the "moderates" and radicals like Karl Liebknecht. The corrupting effect on an ex-printer or an ex-saddler of being treated as an important personage by the Junker aristocracy was considerable. Referring to Scheidemann's memoirs of the war period, Carl Schorske in his excellent *German Social Democracy 1905-1917* (1955) comments: "No reader of Scheidemann can miss the genuine pleasure which he felt in being invited to discuss matters on an equal footing with the ministers of state." The German Social Democracy had become an institution through which able, ambitious young workers could reach the top of a highly class- and caste-stratified society.

Zinoviev's major 1916 work corrects the emphasis on ideological revisionism as the cause of opportunism which is found in Lenin's earliest war writings. In fact, the SPD's official doctrine and program failed to reflect its increasingly reformist practice. Many of the social-democratic leaders, overwhelmingly of working-class background, retained a sentimental attachment to the socialist cause long after they ceased believing in it as practical politics. Only the war forced the SPD to break openly with socialist principle.

Zinoviev recognized that social-chauvinist ideology was false consciousness arising from the SPD officialdom's actual role in Wilhelminian German society:

"When we speak of the 'treachery of the leaders' we do not say by this that it was a deep-laid plot, that it was a consciously perpetrated sell-out of the workers' interests. Far from it. But consciousness is conditioned by existence, not *vice versa*. The entire social essence of this caste of labor bureaucrats led inevitably, *through the outmoded pace set for the movement in the 'peaceful' pre-war period*, to complete bourgeoisification of their 'consciousness.' The entire social position into which this numerically strong caste of leaders had climbed over the backs of the working class made them a social group which objectively must be regarded as an agency of the imperialist bourgeoisie." [emphasis in original]

The anarcho-syndicalists applauded the revolutionary Marxists' attack on the social-democratic bureaucracy and proclaimed: we told you so. Thus the Bolsheviks in attacking official Social Democracy carefully distinguished their position from the anarcho-syndicalists. Zinoviev pointed out that the existence of a powerful reformist bureaucracy was, in one sense, a product of the development and *strength* of the mass labor movement. The anarcho-syndicalists' answer to bureaucratism amounted to self-liquidation of the workers movement as an organized force objectively capable of overthrowing capitalism. If the reformist bureaucracy suppressed the revolutionary potential of the workers movement, the anarcho-syndicalists proposed to disorganize that movement into impotence.

Zinoviev maintained that a bureaucracy was *not* identical with a large organization of party and trade-union functionaries. On the contrary, such an apparatus was necessary to lead the working class to power. The decisive task was the subordination of the leaders and functionaries of the labor movement to the historic interests of the international proletariat:

"At the time of the crisis over the war, the labor bureaucracy played the role of a reactionary factor. That is undoubtedly correct. But that does not mean the labor movement will be able to get along without a big organizational apparatus, without an entire spectrum of people devoted especially to service the proletarian organization. We do not want to go back to the time when the labor movement was so weak that it could get along without its own employees and functionaries, but to go forward to the time when the labor movement will be some-

thing different, in which the strong movement of the proletariat will subordinate the stratum of functionaries to itself, in which routine will be destroyed, bureaucratic corrosion wiped out; which will bring new men to the surface, infuse them with fighting courage, fill them with a new spirit."

There is no mechanical organizational solution to bureaucratism in the workers movement or even in its vanguard party. Combatting bureaucratism and reformism involves *continual* political struggle against the many-sided influences and pressures bourgeois society brings to bear upon the workers movement, its various strata and its vanguard.

## The Leninist Position on the Labor Aristocracy

The Marxists of the Second International were fully aware that the entire working class did not support socialism. Many workers adhered to bourgeois ideology (e.g., religion) and supported the capitalist parties. Pre-1914 social democrats generally associated political backwardness with social backwardness. In particular, they saw that workers newly drawn from the peasantry and other small proprietors tended to retain the outlook of their former class. Thus Kautsky in his 1909 *The Road to Power* wrote:

"To a large degree hatched out of the small capitalist and small farmer class, many proletarians long carry the shells of these classes around with them. They do not feel themselves proletarians, but as would-be property owners."

In other words, the classic social-democratic position was that those workers who had a low cultural level, were unskilled, unorganized, came from a rural background, etc., would be most submissive toward bourgeois authority. In the context of late 19th-century Germany and France, this political-sociological generalization was valid.

However, with the development of a strong trade-union movement, social and political conservatism appeared at the top of the working class and not only at the bottom. Skilled workers in strong craft unions insulated themselves to a certain degree from the labor market and cyclical unemployment and tended to express a narrow corporate outlook.

The phenomenon of a labor aristocratic caste, like that of the labor bureaucracy, first manifested itself in Victorian England. The narrow corporate spirit of the British craft unions was well known. Furthermore, the upper stratum of the British working class was almost exclusively English and Scottish, while the Irish were a significant part of the unskilled labor force.

The composition of pre-war German Social Democracy consisted largely of skilled, better-off workers. Zinoviev saw in this sociological composition an important source of reformism:

"The predominant mass of the membership of the Berlin social-democratic organization is composed of *trained, of skilled workers*. In other words, the *predominant mass of the membership of the social-democratic organization consists of the better-paid strata of labor*—of those strata from which the greatest section of the labor aristocracy arises. [emphasis in original]

—*The War and the Crisis of Socialism*

Zinoviev makes no attempt to demonstrate empirically that the labor aristocracy provided the base for the SPD right wing; he merely asserts it. He can therefore be criticized for mechanically transposing the political sociology of Edwardian Britain onto the very different terrain of Wilhelminian Germany. Craft unionism never played as important a role in Germany as in Britain. On the other hand, rural backwardness loomed large in the political life of Germany right up until the war. The rock-solid base of the SPD right wing was the party's provincial organizations. Right-wing bureaucrats



Teenage workers from the Putilov Factory take part in the May Day demonstrations. One of their many banners reads: "Long Live the Third International, Road to Enlightenment of Youth."



tried to counter the radicals, who were always concentrated in the big cities, by gerrymandering the party's electoral districts in favor of the small towns. A farmer's son working as an unskilled laborer in a South German town was more likely to support the SPD right, represented by Bernstein and Eduard David, than was a Berlin master machinist.

However, if Zinoviev was too mechanical in imposing a British model of the sociological bases of opportunism on the SPD, the basic Leninist position on the stratification of the working class in the imperialist epoch remains valid. In advanced capitalist countries with a large, well-established labor movement, the upper strata of the working class will frequently tend toward social and political conservatism relative to the mass of the proletariat. Moreover, within certain economic limits, the bourgeoisie and labor bureaucracy can widen the gap between the labor aristocracy and the class as a whole.

Zinoviev is certainly correct when he writes:

"To foster splits between the various strata of the working class, to promote competition among them, to segregate the upper stratum from the rest of the proletariat by corrupting it and making it an agency for bourgeois 'respectability'—that is entirely in the interests of the bourgeoisie.... They [the social-chauvinists] split the working class inside of every country and thereby intensify and aggravate the split between the working classes of various countries."

—Zinoviev (*op. cit.*)

The uppermost stratum of the working class is not always and everywhere politically to the right of the mass of the proletariat. Sometimes the greater economic security of highly skilled workers produces a situation where they maintain a more radical political attitude than the mass of organized workers, who are more concerned with their day-to-day material needs. Thus in Weimar Germany in the 1920s, Communist support among skilled workers was relatively greater than among the basic factory labor force, which looked to the Social Democrats for immediate reforms. Franz Borkenau wrote of the German Communist Party

membership in 1927:

"Skilled workers and people who have been skilled workers make up two-fifths of the party membership; if their women-folk were added they would probably make up nearly half.... If there is any such thing as a worker's aristocracy, here it is."

—*World Communism* (1939)

Lenin's position on the labor aristocracy was an important corrective to the traditional, positive social-democratic orientation to that stratum, an orientation which was in part a conservative reaction to the rapid growth of the unskilled labor force from among a politically conservative and socially backward peasantry. While workers from a rural background can be extremely militant, they are highly volatile and difficult to organize on a stable basis. For example, migrant farm labor and similar groups (e.g., lumberjacks) drawn into the syndicalist American Industrial Workers of the World before World War I demonstrated great combativity, but also great organizational instability.

No self-professed Marxist today maintains as positive an orientation to the highly skilled, well-paid sections of the working class as did the Social Democracy. On the contrary, during the past period New Left "Marxism" has gone to the opposite extreme, dismissing the entire organized proletariat in the advanced capitalist countries as a "labor aristocracy" bought off by the spoils of imperialism. Just as at one time the revolutionary Marxists' attack on the social-democratic bureaucracy was exploited by the anarcho-syndicalists, so in our day Lenin's critical analysis of the role of the labor aristocracy is distorted and exploited in the service of anti-proletarian petty-bourgeois radicalism, particularly nationalism.

A leading intellectual inspirer of New Left Third Worldism (more or less associated with Maoism) has been Paul Sweezy of *Monthly Review*. His revisionist distortion of Lenin's analysis of the labor aristocracy is presented with especial angularity in a centenary article on the publication of

the first volume of *Capital*, "Marx and the Proletariat" (*Monthly Review*, December 1967). Here Sweezy claims Lenin's *Imperialism* for the proposition that the principal social force for revolution in our epoch has shifted to the rural masses in the backward countries:

"His [Lenin's] major contribution was his little book *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* which, having been published in 1917, is exactly half as old as the first volume of *Capital*. There he argued that 'Capitalism has grown into a world system of colonial oppression and of the financial strangulation of the overwhelming majority of the people of the world by a handful of "advanced" countries....' He also argued that the capitalists of the imperialist countries could and do use part of their 'booty' to bribe and win over to their side an aristocracy of labor. As far as the logic of the argument is concerned, it could be extended to a majority or even all the workers in the industrialized countries. In any case it is clear that taking into account the global character of the capitalist system provides strong additional reasons for believing that the tendency in this stage of capitalist development will be to generate a less rather than a more revolutionary proletariat." [our emphasis]

The New Left is quite wrong in simply identifying the labor aristocracy with the better-paid sectors of the proletariat. In the first place, many of the relatively higher-paid workers (e.g., auto workers or truckers in the U.S.) are members of industrial unions of the unskilled and semi-skilled, who won their wage levels through militant struggle against the bosses rather than imperialist bribery or job-trusting. Nor can all craft unions be counted among the labor aristocracy. The needle trades, organized along craft lines, are among the lowest-paid unionized workers in the U.S.

In *Imperialism* and related writings, Lenin emphasized again and again that the labor aristocracy represented a small minority of the proletariat. And this was not an empirical estimate but a basic sociological proposition. A group can occupy a privileged social position *only in relation* to the working masses of the society of which it is a part. The New Left Third Worldist notion that the proletariat in the imperialist centers is a labor aristocracy in relation to the impoverished colonial masses denies that the European and North American working class is centrally defined by its *exploitation* at the hands of "its" bourgeoisie. It is methodologically similar to the argument of apologists for apartheid in South Africa that black workers in that country are better off than those in the rest of Africa.

However, Sweezy's revisionism is not limited to extending the category of labor aristocracy to the majority of workers in the advanced capitalist countries. He also distorts Lenin's attitude toward the actual labor aristocracy, which is a sociological not a political category. For the uppermost stratum of the working class, defense of its petty privileges often dominates its consciousness and action. It is thus a culture medium for the false consciousness which sees the workers' interests as tied to those of "their" bourgeoisie (support for imperialist war, protectionism, "profit-sharing" schemes, etc.). But the labor aristocracy is also a part of the working class, sharing common class interests with the rest of the proletariat, and thus cannot be considered as ultimately inherently pro-imperialist. Under normal capitalist conditions, the labor aristocracy may well seek short-term economic advantages at the expense of the class as a whole. However, under the impact of a major depression, a devastating war, etc., the long-term interests of this stratum as a section of the proletariat will tend to come to the fore.

Leninists even seek to win over exploited sectors of the

petty bourgeoisie proper (e.g., teachers, small farmers) to the cause of revolutionary socialism. Therefore they can scarcely consign a section of the working class, albeit a relatively privileged, petty-bourgeoisified section, to the camp of bourgeois counterrevolution. Labor aristocratic groups can end up on the wrong side of the barricades in a revolutionary situation. In the October Revolution, the relatively privileged railway workers provided a base for the Mensheviks' counterrevolutionary activities. However, the oil workers in Mexico, likewise an elite proletarian group in a backward country, have long been among the most advanced sections of that country's labor movement. In an important article written shortly after *Imperialism*, Lenin explicitly states that what fraction of the proletariat will eventually side with the bourgeoisie can only be determined through political struggle:

"Neither we nor anyone else can calculate precisely what portion of the proletariat is following and will follow the social-chauvinists and opportunists. This will be revealed only by the struggle, it will definitely be decided only by the socialist revolution."

—"Imperialism and the Split in Socialism"  
(October 1916)

The Leninist attitude toward the labor aristocracy is significantly different than toward its leadership, the labor bureaucracy. In the imperialist epoch, the age of capitalist decay, successful reformism is impossible. Thus whatever their background and original motivation, unless they explicitly adopt a revolutionary course the leaders of the labor movement are forced by their social role to subordinate the workers' interests to the bourgeoisie. As Lenin later wrote of the "labor lieutenants of the bourgeoisie":

"Present-day (twentieth-century) imperialism has given a few advanced countries an exceptionally privileged position, which, everywhere in the Second International, has produced a certain type of traitor, opportunist, and social-chauvinist leaders, who champion the interests of their own craft, their own section of the labour aristocracy.... The revolutionary proletariat cannot be victorious unless this evil is combated, unless the opportunist, social-traitor leaders are exposed, discredited and expelled."

—"Left Wing" Communism, An Infantile Disorder  
(1920)

In contrast, skilled, well-paid workers, while more susceptible to conservative bourgeois ideology, are not "agents of the bourgeoisie in the workers movement" (*Ibid.*). Like the rest of the proletariat, they must be won away from their treacherous misleaders.

## Classic Marxism and the Leninist Vanguard Party

By 1916, Lenin had developed both the programmatic and theoretical basis for a split with official social democracy and the creation of an international vanguard party modeled on the Bolsheviks. The actual formation of the Communist International in 1919 was, of course, decisively affected by the Bolshevik Revolution and establishment of the Soviet state. However, this series concerns the evolution of Lenin's position on the organizational question away from traditional revolutionary Social Democracy. And that process was essentially completed before the Russian Revolution. We therefore conclude with a discussion of the relationship of the Leninist vanguard party to the previous Marxist experience around the organizational question.

With respect to the vanguard party, the history of the Marxist movement appears paradoxical. The first Marxist organization, the Communist League of 1847-52, was a van-



guard propaganda group which clearly demarcated itself from all other tendencies in the socialist and workers movements (e.g., from Blanquism, Cabet's Icarians, German "true" socialism, British Chartism). By contrast, the International Workingmen's Association (First International), established a generation later, sought to be an inclusive body embracing all working-class organizations. A central pillar of the First International was the British trade-union movement, which politically supported the bourgeois liberals. The Socialist (Second) International, although its dominant section was the Marxist German Social Democracy, sought to be inclusive of all proletarian socialist parties. In 1908, the Second International even admitted the newly formed British Labour Party which did not claim to be socialist.

Thus the Communist International of 1919 was in a sense a resurrection of the Communist League of 1848 on a mass foundation.

How does one account for the absence of the vanguard party principle in classic, late 19th-century Marxism? Stalinist writers sometimes deny this fact, distorting history so as to make Marx/Engels out as advocates of Leninist organizational principles. On the other hand, it would be a historic idealism to criticize Marx/Engels for their organizational policies and to maintain that the equivalent of the Communist International could and should have been established in the 1860s-90s.

The formation of the Communist League of 1847 was predicated on an imminent bourgeois-democratic revolution. The task of organizing the people, including the urban artisan-proletariat, was being accomplished by the broader revolutionary democratic movement. The task of the Communist League was to vie for leadership of an *existing* revolutionary movement against the bourgeois democrats (as well as utopian socialists). The Communist League thus defined itself as the proletarian socialist vanguard of the revolutionary bourgeois-democratic movement. With the definitive end of the 1848 revolutionary period (signaled by the 1852 Cologne Communist trial), Marx's strategy and its organizational component became unviable.

Between the revolutions of 1848 and the Russian Revolution of 1905, the possibilities of a successful bourgeois-democratic revolution had been exhausted while the economic bases for a proletarian-socialist revolution were still immature in the principal countries of West Europe. (Britain presented its own exceptional problems in this regard. However, even though Britain was far more advanced than France or Germany, in the 1850s house servants still outnumbered industrial workers.) The task of socialists was to create the *precondition* for a socialist revolution through the organization of the proletariat from an *atomized* condition. Furthermore, in the decades immediately following the defeat of 1848, mass, stable working-class organizations in Germany and France were impeded by effective state repression.

A Leninist-type vanguard party in Germany or France in the 1860s-90s would have existed in a political vacuum



M.S. Nappelbaum

Lenin at First Congress of the Communist International, March 1919.

unrelated to any broader potentially revolutionary movement. Thus in the period following the dissolution of the First International, Marx *opposed* the re-establishment of an international center as a *diversion* from the task of building a workers movement actually capable of overthrowing capitalism. In a letter (22 February 1881) to the Dutch anarchist Ferdinand Domela-Nieuwenhuis, he wrote:

"It is my conviction that the critical juncture for a new International Working Men's Association has not yet arrived and for that reason I regard all workers' congresses or socialist congresses, in so far as they are not directly related to the conditions existing in this or that particular nation, as not merely useless but actually harmful. They will always ineffectually end in endlessly repeated general banalities."

— Marx/Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (1975)

In West Europe, the transition from the revolutionary bourgeois-democratic movement to mass proletarian socialist parties required an entire epoch involving decades of *preparatory* activity.

The situation facing Marxists in tsarist Russia was fundamentally different. There a bourgeois-democratic revolution appeared a short-term prospect. A revolutionary bourgeois-democratic movement existed in the form of radical (socialist) populism with broad support among the intelligentsia.

In important respects, the conditions facing Plekhanov's Emancipation of Labor group in the 1880s paralleled those facing the Communist League before the revolution of 1848. Plekhanov projected a proletarian party (initiated by the socialist intelligentsia) which would act as a vanguard in the bourgeois-democratic revolution, while sharply demarcating itself from all petty-bourgeois radical currents. This vanguardist conception is clearly stated in the 1883 program of the Emancipation of Labor group:

"One of the most harmful consequences of the backward state of production was and still is the underdevelopment of the middle class, which, in our country, is incapable of taking the *initiative* in the struggle against absolutism.

"That is why our socialist intelligentsia has been obliged to head the present-day emancipation movement, whose direct task must be to set up free political institutions in our country, the socialists on their side being under the obligation to provide the working class with the possibility to take an active

and fruitful part in the future political life of Russia." [emphasis in original]

—G. Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, Volume 1 (1961)

In Bismarckian and Wilhelminian Germany, all bourgeois parties were hostile to Social Democracy, which represented both the totality of the workers movement and by far the most significant force for democratic political change. The Catholic Center Party, National-Liberals and Progressives were only episodically viewed as a challenge to the semi-autocratic government. By contrast, Russian social democrats had to compete for cadre and for popular influence, including among the industrial proletariat, with the radical populists and at times even with the liberals. Moreover, since Russia was a multinational state, the social democrats also had to compete with left nationalist parties like the Ukrainian Radical Democratic Party and the Polish Socialist Party, and similar parties in the Baltic region and Transcaucasus.

The organizational principles of Plekhanovite Social Democracy thus had a dual character. With respect to the proletariat, early Russian social democrats sought to become "the party of the whole class" emulating the SPD. But they also sought to become the vanguard of all the diverse anti-tsarist forces in the Russian empire.

From Plekhanovite Social Democracy Lenin inherited vanguardist conceptions absent in the West European socialist parties. The significance of the fight against Economism, which was initiated by Plekhanov not Lenin, was in preserving the vanguard role of Social Democracy in relation to the broad, heterogeneous bourgeois-democratic forces. Because

Lenin split Russian Social Democracy (in 1903) *before* it achieved a mass base, he did not fully recognize the significance of what he had done. He regarded the split with the Mensheviks as a legitimate continuation of the struggle to separate proletarian socialism from petty-bourgeois democracy. In reality, he had separated the revolutionary socialists from the reformists, both seeking a working-class base.

The world-historic significance of pre-1914 Bolshevism was that it anticipated the organizational principles required for victory in the epoch of imperialist capitalism and of proletarian revolution. As the epoch of capitalist degeneration opened up with World War I, the *principal* obstacle to proletarian revolution was no longer the underdevelopment of bourgeois society and of the workers movement. It was now the reactionary labor bureaucracy, resting upon a powerful workers movement, which preserved an obsolete social system. The first task of revolutionary socialists was henceforth defeating and replacing the reformists as the leadership of the mass workers movement, the precondition to leading that movement to victory over capitalism and laying the basis for a socialist society. This task has a dual character. The establishment of a revolutionary vanguard party splits the working class politically. However, a vanguard party seeks to lead the mass of the proletariat through *united* economic organizations of class struggle, the trade unions. In a revolutionary situation, a vanguard party seeks to lead a united working class to power through soviets, the organizational basis of a workers government.

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